Everybody Knows

Islamophobia, safety and belonging in our town

A community-led report on the experiences of Muslims in Luton

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Produced by
FACES Luton
The Raise Up Foundation
The Courtney Foundation

FACES RAISE UP FOUNDATION THE COURTNEY FOUNDATION

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Foreword

Luton is home. It is where I belong. Our communities face real challenges, like many post-industrial towns, and the financial impacts have been harsh. Yet this is a place that has real heart; where people have always come together to support one another through difficult times.

For as long as I can remember, Luton has carried a weight that its residents did not choose and do not deserve: a reputation written by others, in language designed to mark the people who live here as suspect and dangerous.

I know the impact of these narratives intimately. Racism and Islamophobia have been defining features of my life and continue to punctuate my daily experiences. I have felt the full force of institutional power, which attempts to frame my words, actions and being as alien and harmful.

I know that these experiences are not unique to me. In my own research on the experiences of young Muslims in Luton, I found that this discourse, circulated through media, policy, and the everyday currency of national conversation, produces what W.E.B. Du Bois[1] called a "double consciousness": the experience of always seeing yourself through the eyes of a society that views you with suspicion. The young people I spoke to loved Luton and spoke warmly of community and belonging. But in the same breath, they described the constant work of navigating a world that had already decided who they were. They talked about moderating and positioning themselves outside of negative stereotypes, and about the quiet exhaustion of proving, again and again, that they are not what the headlines say.

What comes to light in this report tells me that not much has changed, and in some respects things have gotten worse. The data gathered here echoes what I found in my research, and what national datasets have

[1]Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). The Souls of Black Folk. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co

been documenting with increasing urgency: that anti-Muslim hatred in Britain has reached record levels, and that the institutions which should offer protection often compound the harm.

We must recognise that the reach of this prejudice extends far beyond isolated incidents of interpersonal malice; it inflicts deep, compounding damage on the fundamental life outcomes of people in our communities. Islamophobia operates as a quiet drain on physical health, eroding mental health, fuelling chronic stress, and diminishing daily well-being. Ultimately, it actively suppresses the life chances of Luton's residents—stifling social mobility, restricting equitable access to secure employment, and compromising the very quality of education our children receive.

What is different about this report is where it comes from. It was not written by distant researchers or policy analysts, but by three organisations (FACES Luton, The Raise Up Foundation, and The Courtney Foundation) that are embedded in this town and have gained the trust required to hear what residents and young people think and feel.

What strikes me most about the testimonies you will read is the gap between what people experience and what they feel able to do about it. Eighty-nine per cent of those who experienced or witnessed Islamophobia received no support afterwards, which points to something beyond a gap in provision, suggesting instead deep structural failures. When people stop reporting because they have stopped expecting institutions to act, and when young people in school conclude that "nobody does anything", we are witnessing a social contract in serious trouble: a fundamental breakdown of trust between a community and the institutions that exist to serve it.

I also hear something else in this report, something I recognise from my own work. Alongside the pain and the frustration, there is a refusal to be defined by the discourses that circulate about this town and its people.

One participant in my research put it simply:

"All I know is that I am Muslim. And, yeah, that's enough. In fact, I think it is everything."

This statement resonates with me as a declaration of selfhood: a rejection of conditional acceptance, and a refusal to distance themselves from their faith in order to 'fit in' or be deemed acceptable.

Importantly, though, this report is not just for Luton's Muslim community. It is for everyone who has a stake in Luton's future, which is to say everyone who lives or works here and every institution that serves this town. I would ask that you read it carefully, sit with whatever discomfort it provokes, and consider what action you are willing to take.

Rehana Faisal
Chair, The Raise Up Foundation and Co-Chair, FACES Luton

Acknowledgement

We dedicate this report to Dr Lucie Moore, our friend and colleague at FACES Luton, who passed away suddenly in November 2024.

Lucie understood the personal cost of speaking openly about racism and stood alongside us when that openness drew criticism. Lucie would remind us that criticism came not because we were wrong, but because the truth is too difficult for many people to both say and hear. She would urge us to continue to challenge.

We hold this advice, alongside her memory, close.

A note from the organisers

Over the course of Islamophobia Awareness Month 2025, three local organisations — FACES Luton, The Raise Up Foundation, and The Courtney Foundation — came together to listen. We conducted a detailed community survey of 209 residents and visitors, and facilitated a group discussion with school pupils. What we heard was powerful, painful, and urgent. As one young person in our school discussion put it:

> **"Everybody knows, but nobody does anything. We don't matter."**

This report is our response. You do matter. What you told us matters, and we are sharing it because local leaders, institutions, and partners need to hear it.

Throughout this report, we situate local experiences within the broader national evidence base. The local findings are consistent with what national datasets from Tell MAMA, the Home Office, and the Muslim Census have documented. **Two-thirds of Muslim respondents (67%) reported experiencing or witnessing Islamophobia within Luton in just the six months before the survey — and across their lifetimes, in any setting, that figure reaches 94%.** The national picture is one of record levels of anti-Muslim hate in 2024; our local findings confirm that Luton is not insulated from these trends.

This remains very much a Luton report, grounded in local experience and offering relevant and necessary recommendations for local organisations. We share it with partners in the hope that it prompts honest conversation, meaningful action, and a commitment to the safety, dignity, and belonging of every person who calls Luton home.

FACES RAISE UP FOUNDATION THE COURTNEY FOUNDATION

A note from Luton Council of Mosques

Luton Council of Mosques represents the town's mosques and Islamic centres. Together, we serve a Muslim community of over 74,000 people. We welcome this report and commend the work of FACES Luton, The Raise Up Foundation, and The Courtney Foundation in producing it.

What this report documents is not new to us. The experiences described here are consistent with what we hear from our congregations regularly. Parents tell us that they are worried about their children's wellbeing at school. We know people in our community, women in particular, fear travelling on public transport due to the risk of Islamophobic abuse and violence. We hear from workers who stay silent about discrimination in their workplaces because they fear the consequences of speaking up. These are not isolated stories; they are part of a consistent pattern of experiences, and they have been escalating.

We recognise the courage it has taken for individuals to share these experiences, and the significant effort required of the community organisations involved to gather, analyse, and present this evidence without institutional support or funding. This is especially notable given how many in our community feel reluctant to have these conversations at all. When the prevailing experience is that speaking up leads nowhere, silence becomes the rational response.

We hope, therefore, that those in positions of authority will demonstrate that this time, speaking up will lead to something. We would urge Luton Borough Council, Bedfordshire Police, local schools and colleges, NHS partners, and employers across the town to read this report carefully and to engage with its recommendations as a matter of priority. The data is here. The testimony is here. Our community has spoken clearly. We expect that clarity to be met with action.

Imam Muhammad Rayhan
General Secretary, Luton Council of Mosques

A note from FACES Luton

The findings set out in this document are something many of us already knew: that the climate for Muslims in our town has changed. The evidence in these pages shows that both nationally and locally, Islamophobia is growing in this country. As a Christian leader, and as someone who has spent a long time working alongside Muslim neighbours in this town, the findings in this report do not surprise me. My hopes are that those with the power to improve the lives of Muslims locally are ready to face what is evidenced here, and make a positive difference through their actions.

This is a local report, and presents the experiences of people living in our town. Muslims make up nearly a third of Luton's population and if we are a community that takes safeguarding seriously, we cannot treat the safety and belonging of so many of our residents as a niche concern. The Christian tradition places "love your neighbour as yourself" at the centre of how we are called to live — and the neighbour is the actual person down the road, on the bus, in the next classroom. When young Muslims in our town describe being treated as though they are "another species" rather than fellow human beings, they call into question whether we are honouring that command.

It is important to be clear about what this report is, and what it is not. It is an account of institutional and structural failure, not a catalogue of individual bad behaviour. Sir William Macpherson's framing of institutional racism — adopted by UK public policy after the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry — describes this. The question is not whether any given officer, teacher, manager or clinician is prejudiced. The question is whether the policies, practices and procedures of our institutions produce unequal outcomes for Muslim residents, regardless of intent. The findings in these pages suggest they do.

I would add one further observation. As someone who has led a multicultural church for many years, and who has written and spoken on these questions over a long period, I recognise much of what Muslim residents have described. The same prejudice that targets a visibly Muslim woman on a train, or a hijab-wearing child at school, is like that

which has been directed at other communities of colour, at women, at migrants, and at those who are disadvantaged, in different forms. Islamophobia is perhaps one of its most prominent current expressions in this country, but it is inseparable from the wider structures of racialised and dehumanising harm that have shaped our world for centuries. **To stand against one is to stand against all.**

This is not a Muslim problem for Muslims to solve. It is a problem about the kind of town we are willing to be. The burden of naming it has fallen, once again, on the community experiencing it. The responsibility for changing the institutions and structures that produce it falls on all of us. We need to work together to eliminate all forms of racism, including Islamophobia. If we do not act, the divisions within our society will continue to grow with, I believe, devastating effects.

Tony Thompson
Co-Chair, FACES Luton

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a community survey and a school-based group discussion conducted in Luton during Islamophobia Awareness Month (November 2025). The research was co-produced by FACES Luton, The Raise Up Foundation, and The Courtney Foundation — three Luton-based organisations with deep roots in the town's diverse communities.

The figures that follow come primarily from the 195 Muslim residents who took part, set within a total sample of 209. This is a substantial body of local testimony, and one that aligns closely with national data from Tell MAMA, the Home Office, and the Muslim Census. These were people who chose to respond rather than a scientific cross-section of the town, but what they describe is consistent, widespread, and echoed wherever Islamophobia has been measured.

Key Findings

51%

reported feeling 'less safe' or 'less welcome'

More than half of all Muslim respondents (51%) reported feeling 'less safe' or 'less welcome' over the preceding six months than they had before. Many indicated this erosion of safety and welcome was driven overwhelmingly by the rise of far-right activity, hostile media representation, and the lasting impact of the summer 2024 riots.

67%

said they experienced or witnessed Islamophobia within Luton

Two-thirds of Muslim respondents (67%) said they experienced or witnessed Islamophobia within Luton in the six months before the survey. Nearly half (47%) had personally experienced it themselves. Taken across all settings and across respondents' lifetimes (in Luton and beyond, online, at work, in schools, and in public services), the figure rises to 94%, indicating that almost no respondent had been left untouched by Islamophobia at some point.

62%

reported experiencing or witnessing racism or Islamophobia at work

62% of Muslim respondents reported experiencing or witnessing racism or Islamophobia at work. The workplace emerged as a critical site of Islamophobia. Incidents ranged from mocking of the hijab to the dismissal of Muslim names. Respondents described colleagues refusing to use full names, defaulting to shortened versions, or not bothering to pronounce them correctly. One manager said there were "too many hijabi staff" (survey respondent, Muslim woman, 55–64) and claimed that this made clients feel uncomfortable.

38%

said the police 'rarely' or 'never' treated them fairly and with respect

38% of Muslim respondents said the police 'rarely' or 'never' treated them fairly and with respect. Trust in public services is deeply fractured. Among those who had experienced Islamophobia, the overwhelming majority reported that they received no support afterwards.

36%

of Muslim women reported feeling 'quite' or 'very' unsafe in Luton

36% of Muslim women in our survey reported feeling 'quite' or 'very' unsafe in Luton, compared with 26% of Muslim men. This 10-point gap exists even though men and women report experiencing or witnessing Islamophobia at near-identical rates (95% of Muslim women and 93% of Muslim men).

The gap is not in exposure but in vulnerability. The House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2026)[2] report on gendered Islamophobia identifies this as a structural feature of anti-Muslim hostility: Muslim women are frequently the most visible public signifiers of their faith through religious attire such as the hijab or niqab, and as a result bear a disproportionate share of localised, public hostility.

[2]House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2026). Discrimination, harassment and abuse against Muslim women. HC 571.

Zempi and Awan (2016)[3] demonstrate how this visibility alters day-to-day spatial mobility, transforming public transport and local streets into high-risk spaces where Muslim women are forced to restrict their movements out of fear of verbal or physical targeting.

The testimonies in our survey reflect this directly: abuse directed at the hijab and niqab, verbal harassment in public spaces, intimidation on public transport, and discrimination in healthcare and workplace settings. Muslim women were also more likely to say the police 'rarely' or 'never' treated them fairly (40% compared with 35% of Muslim men).

17%

of young Muslim respondents said they had someone they could speak to at school about racism or Islamophobia

Only 17% of young Muslim respondents said they had someone they could speak to at school about racism or Islamophobia. Among those who did experience or witness it — 75% of young Muslim respondents for whom the question was applicable — 88% received no support afterwards. The survey data and the group discussion converge on the same conclusion: the infrastructure intended to support young Muslims in schools is largely absent, and where it exists, it is not trusted. School pupils described collective blame, fear of judgement, and a perception that Muslims are portrayed as less than human. Both survey respondents and focus group participants expressed deep scepticism that speaking up would lead to any change. Young people are encountering Islamophobia from an early age, and they have concluded, on the basis of repeated experience, that the adults and institutions around them will not act on it.

[3]Zempi, I. and Awan, I. (2016). Islamophobia: Lived Experiences of Online and Offline Victimisation. Policy Press.

91%

said stronger laws and consequences could help

Respondents overwhelmingly backed systemic measures over gestures of individual sympathy. Across all respondents, the most strongly supported measures included stronger laws and consequences for hate incidents (91% said this would help), anti-racism training in schools and institutions (88%), and local leaders standing together against hate (87%).

"Whenever I go out I have to think about where I'm going and what I am wearing, especially after the riots. I was born in England and lived in Luton my whole life, but I think it is time that we started thinking about leaving before we are forced to. My daughter is 11 and she asked me why people hate us and it's disgusting that our children are made to feel this way and nobody cares."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 45-54

1. About this research

1.1 Context and purpose

Islamophobia Awareness Month (IAM) takes place every November and provides an opportunity for communities, organisations, and institutions to raise awareness of the impact of anti-Muslim prejudice. In 2025, three Luton-based organisations: FACES Luton, The Raise Up Foundation, and The Courtney Foundation, collaboratively produced community-led research to capture the lived experiences of local people and provide an evidence base to inform local partners and decision-makers.

The research comprised two components: a detailed community survey, launched in November 2025 and distributed online and in person, and a facilitated group discussion with school pupils in Luton. The survey was designed to capture experiences of Islamophobia, feelings of safety, belonging, and trust in public services, as well as what respondents believe would reduce the negative experiences they endure. The school discussion used open-ended questions to explore how young people understand and experience Islamophobia in their lives.

1.2 The co-producing organisations

FACES Luton is a Luton-based Christian and Muslim partnership, building resilience within faith communities through its training, family and youth engagement, and research. It centres safeguarding through the lens of community and inclusion, working with families, schools, institutions and faith groups in Luton and across the country.

The Raise Up Foundation brings together grassroots organisations to support young people and families through mentoring, training, and community programmes. Recognising the structural roots of inequality and the institutional obstacles to social mobility, the Foundation works collaboratively with partners to challenge and dismantle systemic disadvantage.

The Courtney Foundation promotes social inclusion and poverty relief in

Luton, supporting local people through its clothing, household, one-to-one, social and refugee support services. Working with some of the most marginalised people in our town, its frontline delivery offers insight and understanding into the ways in which racism and discrimination intersect with deprivation.

1.3 Methodology and sample

The community survey received 209 responses. Of these, 195 (93%) identified as Muslim, and 14 were non-Muslim respondents. To protect participant anonymity and prevent the accidental identification of individuals within smaller demographic groups, data for non-Muslim respondents has been aggregated rather than disaggregated. Ethnically, the sample was predominantly of Pakistani (121, 58%) and Bangladeshi (51, 24%) heritage, with 19 White British respondents (9%) and smaller numbers of Indian, Black African, Arab, Mixed heritage, and other backgrounds. 105 respondents were women and 104 were men. Ages ranged from under 18 to over 65, with the largest concentrations in the 18–24 (50) and 25–34 (48) age groups, followed by 35–44 (43). The vast majority (203 of 209) lived, worked, or studied in Luton, with the remaining six being regular visitors to the town.

The Luton school-based discussion with pupils was facilitated by FACES Luton and The Raise Up Foundation. This session explored two key questions: "What does Islamophobia mean?" and "What does Islamophobia look like?" The young people's responses are featured throughout this report.

The survey captured perspectives from across Luton's communities. While the small size of the non-Muslim cohort (N=14) precludes statistical tracking or percentage generalisations, their qualitative testimonies serve strictly as a mechanism for qualitative cross-community triangulation. These brief accounts corroborate that local anti-Muslim hostility is visible outside of the targeted community itself, with non-Muslim participants highlighting explicit concern over a visible rise in local prejudice. These accounts offer a degree of cross-community corroboration of broader patterns documented by Muslim respondents.

The survey comprised demographic, scaled response, and open-text

questions. For scaled questions, respondents were asked to rate each option independently on a three-point scale. Respondents were not asked to rank or choose between options. Open-text questions invited respondents to describe their experiences in their own words.

To ensure analytical rigour and prevent the conflation of historical, structural, and immediate incidents, this study utilises two distinct temporal and spatial metrics when reporting quantitative data:

1. Cumulative baseline metric (94%): Captures whether a respondent has ever witnessed or experienced Islamophobia across their lifetime in any setting (including digital spheres and non-time-bound institutional settings like macro-employment or healthcare). This measures the systemic footprint and lifetime breadth of Islamophobia.

2. Acute localised metric (67%): Captures incidents occurring strictly within the geographical boundaries of Luton and strictly within the six months preceding data collection. This measures the immediacy, frequency, and local intensity of the contemporary social climate.

A note on how percentages are calculated: Figures describing experiences of Islamophobia, feelings of safety, and trust in services are calculated from the 195 Muslim respondents — or, where stated, from the subset for whom a question was applicable (for example, excluding those who answered 'not applicable' to the workplace or school questions). Figures in Section 6, describing which measures would help residents feel safer or more welcome, are calculated from all 209 respondents, as these questions invited every participant's view rather than recording a personal experience. Where a particular figure uses a different base, this is explained.

200 respondents (96%) consented to their anonymous words being shared. All qualitative quotations used in this report are drawn exclusively from consenting respondents. Quantitative data — aggregated figures, percentages, and statistical patterns — includes all 209 responses, as this data is anonymised and non-attributable. The research included participants under 18 — both younger survey respondents and pupils in the school discussion. The school session was arranged and supervised

in partnership with school staff, participation throughout was voluntary, no respondent under 18 is identified by name or other identifying detail, and all activities were conducted in line with the safeguarding policies of the participating organisations. To protect the anonymity of participating pupils and the school, we have deliberately withheld details that could identify either, whether directly or through jigsaw identification.

1.4 A note on sample size and under-reporting

The community survey received 209 responses, with 195 identifying as Muslim. This is a substantial sample for a community-led study, and we are confident in the patterns it reveals. The demographic profile is broadly reflective of Luton's Muslim communities. Across all respondents, the sample is gender-balanced (105 women, 104 men), spans all age groups from under 18 to over 65, and is ethnically diverse, with significant representation from the Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and other heritage communities that make up Luton's Muslim population. Respondents were recruited through community networks, local organisations, schools, and mosques, with some completing the survey online and others through facilitated paper-based sessions. This approach was chosen deliberately: it enabled participation from individuals who are often excluded from institutional research, including those who distrust formal data collection, and young people. A sample recruited in this way may also over-represent those for whom Islamophobia is a live concern, and we are cautious about reading the headline figures as precise population estimates. The findings are not a statistical estimate for all Muslim residents of Luton, but they represent a substantial body of evidence, much of it rich in qualitative detail, that is consistent with national data and with the academic literature on Muslim experiences in Britain.

Tell MAMA reported 6,313 anti-Muslim hate cases in 2024 — the highest figure in its history and a 43% increase on 2023[4]. The Home Office recorded 3,866 anti-Muslim hate crimes in the year ending March 2024, a 13% rise[5]. The Muslim Census found that 92% of respondents felt less safe following the summer 2024 riots[6].

[4]Tell MAMA (2025). The New Norm of Anti-Muslim Hate: Annual Report 2024.
[5]Home Office (2024). Hate Crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024.
[6]Muslim Census (2024). Riots survey, August 2024.

Our local data aligns closely with these national figures, illustrating that the barriers preventing victims from seeking structural remedy are deeply felt within the Luton cohort.

Even so, it is essential to understand that survey data of any size captures only a fraction of the reality. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (2022–2025) estimates that 56% of hate crimes never come to the attention of police[7]. Among Muslim communities, the barriers to reporting are compounded by low levels of trust in institutions, normalisation of abuse, and fear of being dismissed or disbelieved. This fosters a landscape where individuals view reporting as futile—a dynamic detailed through respondent testimonies later in this report.

These barriers are extensively documented. The House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee's report on Gendered Islamophobia identified a lack of confidence in reporting processes and police responses as key factors in underreporting among Muslim women[8]. The Muslim Council of Britain has stated that "most Islamophobic hate crimes go unreported"[9]. The National Association of Muslim Police acknowledged in written evidence to Parliament that underreporting within Muslim communities remains a systemic challenge, compounded by the fact that Islamophobia within the police service itself undermines the credibility of the institution as a place of safety[10]. Our local data directly substantiates this national climate: 38% of Muslim respondents reported that the police 'rarely' or 'never' treated them fairly, while only 8% stated they were 'always' treated with fairness and respect. Further to this, as the Anti-Bullying Alliance acknowledged in 2023, there is no systematic, high-quality national data on Islamophobic bullying in UK schools[11]. This gap makes local data collection efforts like ours not just valuable, but necessary. What follows in this report is not the full picture; it is what people were willing to tell us. The evidence from wider sources tells us that the true scale of the problem is likely much larger.

[7]Crime Survey for England and Wales (2022–2025). Hate crime estimates, Office for National Statistics.
[8]House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2026). Discrimination, harassment and abuse against Muslim women. HC 571.
[9]Muslim Council of Britain (2024). Response to Home Office Hate Crime Statistics.
[10]National Association of Muslim Police (2019). Written evidence to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims.
[11]Anti-Bullying Alliance (2023). Islamophobic bullying in UK schools: evidence review.

2. Luton: In context

2.1 A super-diverse town

Luton's population stands at 225,261[12]. It is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse towns in England. 74,191 residents — 32.9% of the population — identify as Muslim, more than five times the national average of 6.5%[13]. Muslims are the town's second-largest faith group (32.9%) after Christians (37.9%). The Pakistani community (41,143, 18.3%) is the largest non-white ethnic group, followed by Bangladeshi (20,630, 9.2%) and Indian (12,096, 5.4%). 31.8% of the population identifies as White British, compared with 74.4% nationally[14]. Over 100 languages and dialects are spoken[15].

This diversity is a source of strength. Respondents in our survey spoke of community solidarity, mutual support, and the comfort of living in a town where Muslims have visible presence and civic participation. As one respondent put it:

> **"Luton has a large Muslim community — this helps, as others respect us more because they know other Muslims."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim man, 25-34

But diversity does not inoculate a town against racism. And Luton's history means its Muslim community carries a particular burden.

2.2 The birthplace of the EDL

The English Defence League (EDL) was founded in Luton on 27 June 2009[16], following protests by al-Muhajiroun at a Royal Anglian Regiment

[12]Office for National Statistics (2022). Census 2021: Population and household estimates, England and Wales.
[13]Office for National Statistics (2022). Census 2021: Religion, England and Wales.
[14]Office for National Statistics (2023). Datasets: RM031, released 28 March 2023.
[15]This is Luton: Luton's Demography and Economy. Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.
[16]Copsey, N. (2010). The English Defence League: Challenging Our Country and Our Values of Social Inclusion, Human Rights and Equality. Faith Matters.

homecoming parade. For years afterwards, Luton endured repeated far-right marches — in February 2011, an estimated 2,000 to 2,500 EDL supporters marched through the town centre[17]. For Muslim families, the town centre became effectively inaccessible during these events. Britain First subsequently conducted "mosque invasions" in Luton. Both its leader, Paul Golding, and deputy leader, Jayda Fransen, were convicted of religiously aggravated harassment at Folkestone Magistrates' Court in March 2018, having previously been banned from entering the town under a Bedfordshire Police injunction[18].

Although the EDL is organisationally defunct, its legacy persists. Our survey found respondents who were harassed with EDL references in 2025. One woman described witnessing three men harassing a hijab-wearing woman in a town centre car park, repeatedly telling her to "enter the code: EDL." The far-right has had a multi-generational presence in Luton stretching back to National Front activity in the 1970s and 1980s[19].

2.3 Deprivation and structural inequality

Luton is the 45th most deprived local authority in England[20]. Child poverty stands at 39.4% after housing costs, affecting approximately 24,400 children[21]. In several of the most deprived wards — including Biscot and Dallow — child poverty rates exceed 45%. In 2022, Luton became a Marmot Town[22], partnering with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to tackle health inequalities. The resulting report highlighted life expectancy gaps of up to eight years between the town's most and least deprived neighbourhoods.

[17]BBC News (2011). "EDL and UAF stage rival protests in Luton", 5 February 2011. Bartlett, J. and Littler, M. (2011). Inside the EDL: Populist Politics in a Digital Age. Demos.
[18]Luton Today (2018). "Britain First duo banned from Luton are jailed for harassment", 8 March 2018.
[19]Copsey, N. (2010). The English Defence League: Challenging Our Country and Our Values of Social Inclusion, Human Rights and Equality. Faith Matters.
[20]Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025). Index of Multiple Deprivation.
[21]End Child Poverty (2022–23). Local child poverty estimates after housing costs.
[22]UCL Institute of Health Equity (2022). Luton Marmot Town report.

This structural deprivation is not incidental to experiences of Islamophobia. As the academic Nasar Meer has argued, religion is not only marginalised but "essentialised and racialised, becoming a central/core axis of discrimination"[23]. For Muslim communities in Luton, the intersection of racial discrimination, religious prejudice, and material deprivation creates compounding disadvantage. This is what researchers describe as "the Muslim penalty" in employment, education, and health outcomes. In 2017, the Social Mobility Commission found that Muslims are roughly half as likely to hold higher professional occupations despite comparable educational achievement, and around 50% of Muslim households live in poverty[24].

[23]Meer, N. and Modood, T. (2012). "For 'Jewish' read 'Muslim'?" Islamophobia Studies Journal, 1(1).
[24]Social Mobility Commission (2017). The Social Mobility Challenges Faced by Young Muslims.

3. The national picture: Islamophobia at record levels

Before turning to our local findings, it is essential to understand the national context in which they sit. Every available measure of anti-Muslim hate in the UK shows a trajectory of escalation.

3.1 Record-breaking figures

Tell MAMA's 2024 annual report, The New Norm of Anti-Muslim Hate, published February 2025, recorded 6,313 incidents of anti-Muslim hate in 2024 — the highest number since the organisation was founded in 2012, and a 43% increase on 2023. The report notes sharp rises in street-based incidents, physical assaults, and attacks targeting visibly Muslim individuals, particularly Muslim women[25].

The Home Office recorded 3,866 anti-Muslim hate crimes in the year ending March 2024, representing nearly 40% of all religious hate crimes[26]. Police data also showed spikes in racially and religiously aggravated offences during periods of far-right unrest following the July 2024 Southport murders.

Muslim Census polling of 4,800 British Muslims earlier this year found that 51.9% strongly felt they belonged in the UK, while only 7.8% felt positive about their future. Among 18–24 year olds, nearly two-thirds reported pessimism about their future in the UK[27].

[25]Tell MAMA (2025). The New Norm of Anti-Muslim Hate: Annual Report 2024. Published 19 February 2025.
[26]Home Office (2024). Hate Crime, England and Wales, year ending March 2024.
[27]Muslim Census / Islamic Relief UK / National Zakat Foundation (2026). The Crisis of Belonging. Published February 2026.

3.2 The summer 2024 riots

The murder of three children in Southport on 29 July 2024 was followed by the rapid spread of misinformation falsely identifying the attacker as a Muslim asylum seeker. The false name was viewed over 420,000 times, with a potential reach of approximately 1.7 billion people across social media platforms[28]. What followed was widely described as the worst civil unrest in the UK since 2011: riots spread to 27 towns and cities[29], resulting in 1,840 arrests as of July 2025[30]. At least 27 verified attacks on mosques were documented between late July and October 2024[31].

Tell MAMA and Survation polling found that 1 in 4 British Muslims experienced anti-Muslim hate after 30 July 2024; 1 in 3 considered leaving the UK[32]. Luton did not experience riots — a fact widely attributed locally to the strength of its inter-faith and community networks — but our survey shows the psychological impact was profound. Respondents repeatedly cited the riots as a driver of diminished safety and belonging.

3.3 Understanding Islamophobia as racism

The academic evidence is clear: Islamophobia operates as a form of racism. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims defined it in 2018 as "rooted in racism and a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness"[33].

Stuart Hall's foundational work on race and representation showed how the "Other" is constructed through media and institutional systems, and his concept of the "floating signifier" helps to explain how cultural

[28]The Independent (2024). "How fake claims over Southport suspect spread like wildfire", 17 August 2024. House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee (2025). Social media, misinformation and harmful algorithms. HC 441.
[29]House of Commons Library (2024). Policing Response to the 2024 Summer Riots.
[30]National Police Chiefs' Council (2025). Update on violent disorder arrests and charges.
[31]British Muslim Trust (2024). The Summer of Division: The Nationwide Surge in Anti-Muslim Hate.
[32]Tell MAMA / Survation (2024). Polling of British Muslims, September–October 2024.
[33]All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018). Islamophobia Defined.

difference is essentialised in ways that mirror older forms of biological racism[34]. Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood have drawn explicit parallels between historical antisemitism and contemporary Islamophobia as forms of racialisation of ethno-religious groups[35].

This is not an abstract theoretical point. When a person shouts "terrorist" at a driver in Luton, when someone whispers racist remarks in a supermarket, or when a manager says that there are "too many hijabi staff", each is an expression of a structural system of racialised power that operates through institutions, media, and everyday interactions. As Baroness Warsi warned in 2011, Islamophobia has "passed the dinner table test"[36]: it has become socially acceptable in settings where other forms of racism would not be tolerated.

3.4 International discourse and local experience

The way that national and international events involving Muslims are narrated in British public life is one of the key discursive contexts through which Islamophobia is articulated and experienced[37]. Media coverage and political commentary consistently produce frameworks in which Muslim populations are rendered collectively suspect, and where Muslim suffering is qualified in ways that would not be applied to others. These frameworks do not emerge in response to events and then recede. They accumulate over time, reinforcing what Stuart Hall described as "regimes of representation" through which racialised groups are fixed in public meaning[38].

Respondents to our survey described international events involving Muslims as part of this wider representational system. In particular, the discourse surrounding Gaza since October 2023 was consistently

[34]Hall, S. (2017). The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation. Harvard University Press.
[35]Meer, N. and Modood, T. (2012). "For 'Jewish' read 'Muslim'?" Islamophobia Studies Journal, 1(1).
[36]Warsi, Baroness S. (2011). Speech at University of Leicester, January 2011.
[37]Runnymede Trust (1997). Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All.
[38]Hall, S. (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. Sage.

interpreted not only as a foreign policy issue, but as a site through which Islamophobia is made visible and understood. Respondents did not simply raise Gaza as a geopolitical concern; they often described it as shaping their experience and interpretation of Islamophobia, both globally and domestically. In their accounts, they identified what they saw as a devaluing of Muslim life, and a framing of Muslim suffering as politically conditional or suspect.

One respondent described how:

> **"...the genocide in Gaza and the way people are being punished for speaking up about it"**
> Survey respondent, Muslim man, 35–44

had contributed directly to feeling less safe in Luton. Another reported that:

> **"...the way politicians and the media have been talking about Gaza since October 7 has made things really hard for Muslims."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 18–24

Another respondent noted that Palestine flags were repeatedly removed in the town while flags erected by far-right groups remained undisturbed, including one displayed outside a mosque.

We saw a number of examples of respondents demonstrating how this representational framing was experienced as directly shaping Islamophobia in everyday life. For example, a young woman shared that she was called a "terrorist and antisemite" while travelling by train. She described being read through a framework that collapses Muslim political expression into threat. A young respondent shared that she had raised the subject of Palestine in class, and was told by her teacher that she "shouldn't talk about things I can't understand." Another reported that a request to hold a fundraiser for Gaza was met by a teacher asking why they did not care about Israel. In each case, the institutional response functioned, in practice, as a form of disciplinary silencing.

The focus group data deepens this picture. Young people in a Luton school drew unprompted connections between what they observed in global discourse and what they experienced locally. One pupil stated:

> **"Nobody is doing anything to stop what's happening in Gaza. It's because they're Muslim."**

Another observed:

> **"We get taught about human rights and the rule of law but those things don't apply to Muslims — look at what Israel is doing to Palestinians."**

These young people were articulating a structural recognition: that the justificatory narratives used to rationalise violence against Muslims abroad are understood by them as continuous with the narratives used to marginalise Muslims in Britain.

Taken together, this illustrates a capacity among respondents to read across contexts. It suggests that the crisis of institutional trust documented here is significantly shaped by what people observe happening to Muslims globally, and by the recognition that similar representational logics are experienced in their own schools, workplaces, and public institutions.

4. Community survey results

4.1 Safety and belonging: A community under pressure

51%

of Muslim respondents said they felt 'less safe' or 'less welcome' over the past 6 months

31%

of Muslim respondents said they felt 'quite unsafe' or 'very unsafe' in Luton itself

Over half (51%) of Muslim respondents reported feeling 'less safe' or 'less welcome' over the preceding six months compared to before. 72 (37%) described their feelings as 'about the same', 13 (7%) were 'not sure', and just 11 (6%) felt 'safer or more welcome'.

Among those who felt less safe, the drivers they told us about were remarkably consistent: the rise of the far-right, hostile media representation of Muslims, the summer 2024 riots, and a political climate in which anti-Muslim rhetoric has become normalised.

The overwhelming direction of travel remains one of deterioration — but it is notable that even the 37% who described their feelings as 'about the same' are not reporting improvement, but the continued normalisation of an already hostile environment.

"The rise of the far-right and blaming Muslims for everything."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 18–24

"Racism in this country is now open and unashamed. We have the government and its MPs and ministers say the most awful things about Muslims with no challenge from anyone. This emboldens everyone and we are feeling the impact of that."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

"Hate being pushed in the media makes me wonder how people view me being a visibly Muslim man."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54

"Reform and the political rhetoric around immigration has given people permission to say things out loud they used to keep to themselves."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 55–64

Nearly one in three Muslim respondents (31%) report feeling 'quite unsafe' or 'very unsafe' within Luton itself. This finding is particularly significant given that it describes a sense of insecurity within a town where the Muslim population is both deeply rooted and highly visible. Representation and familiarity have not, on their own, dispelled fear. This is a sign that the problem runs deeper than unfamiliarity between groups. When this sense of insecurity pervades the spaces where people live, study, and work, it points to conditions that the local environment is failing to address.

Respondents were also asked how welcome they feel in specific local settings. The responses reveal that feelings of belonging weaken in direct proportion to exposure to spaces where Muslim identity becomes a site of risk. 93% of Muslim respondents feel 'completely welcome' or 'very welcome' at places of worship and 69% at community centres, but only 41% in shops, 41% in schools or colleges, and 36% in parks and public spaces. 14% reported feeling 'not at all welcome' in parks and 12% in

shops. This gradient is consistent with the prevalence data documented in Section 4.2: The settings in which respondents report feeling least welcome are the same settings in which they report the highest rates of Islamophobic abuse and discrimination. When 70% have experienced or witnessed Islamophobia in school settings and 62% in workplaces, the low rates of feeling welcome in those environments are an expected consequence. The result is a form of structural exclusion that operates not through formal barriers but through the accumulation of everyday harm.

Given that 94% of Muslim respondents had at some point directly experienced or witnessed Islamophobia, it is unsurprising that this sense of diminished safety was so pervasive. Respondents themselves repeatedly attributed this climate to media coverage and political rhetoric, describing how Muslims come to be fixed in public meaning as suspect or threatening[39]. For most respondents, this was not experienced as an abstract or symbolic issue; rather, macro-level discourse and direct personal experiences each compounded the impact of the other.

As one respondent put it:

> **"The hostility is more brazen now. People used to at least be subtle about it."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim man, 25–34

[39]Hall, S. (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. Sage.

4.2 Experiences of Islamophobia: The scale of the problem

67%

had experienced or witnessed Islamophobia in Luton in the past six months

Within Luton, in the six months before the survey, 131 of 195 Muslim respondents (67%) reported experiencing or witnessing racism or Islamophobia. Of these, 92 had personally experienced it — meaning that nearly half of all Muslim respondents (47%) were directly targeted in their own town within a single six-month window — while 36 had witnessed it happening to others. Three further respondents gave responses consistent with personal experience but selected multiple overlapping options. This is a striking finding for a town in which Muslims constitute a third of the population, and it sits squarely within the national picture.

Contact theory[40] suggests that sustained contact between groups tends to reduce prejudice. Luton, with its long-established Muslim presence and dense inter-community networks, might on that logic be expected to show less hostility. That two-thirds of Muslim respondents nonetheless report experiencing Islamophobia within the town suggests familiarity alone is not protective here. As Warsi[41] suggested, the social acceptability of Islamophobia allows it to coexist with, rather than diminish, prejudice.

This local picture sits within a national context in which anti-Muslim hate has reached record levels: Tell MAMA recorded 6,313 incidents in 2024, a 43% increase on the previous year, with cases targeting visibly Muslim individuals rising by 103%[42]. Our survey suggests that this national trend is acutely felt in Luton.

[40]Allport, G.W. (1954). The Nature of Prejudice. Addison-Wesley; Pettigrew, T.F. and Tropp, L.R. (2006). "A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90(5), 751–783.
[41]Warsi, Baroness S. (2011). Speech at University of Leicester, 20 January 2011.
[42]Tell MAMA (2025). The New Norm of Anti-Muslim Hate: Annual Report 2024.

Looked at across respondents' lifetimes and every setting the survey covered — in Luton, outside of Luton, at school, college, university, and in the workplace — 183 of 195 Muslim respondents (94%) reported having experienced or witnessed racism or Islamophobia at some point. This cumulative figure measures the lifetime breadth of exposure rather than the current local climate: it tells us that Islamophobia is a near-universal feature of these respondents' lives, while the 67% figure above captures how present it is in Luton right now.

Outside Luton, the picture was even more concerning: only 32% of Muslim respondents felt 'quite safe' or 'very safe' when travelling beyond the town, while 28% felt 'quite unsafe' or 'very unsafe'. One respondent stated simply that she did not want to "put myself in that situation."

The incidents described by respondents ranged from verbal abuse in public spaces to discrimination in professional settings. Several recurring patterns emerged:

Street-level verbal abuse:
Respondents told us they were called "terrorist", "paki", "medieval raghead", or "Muslim bitch"; had racist slurs shouted at them from cars; and were told to "go back to your own country" while shopping.

Targeting of visibly Muslim women:
Respondents told us that a man shouted at a woman to "take off" her hijab; another woman was called a "ninja" for wearing niqab; and a woman was intimidated on the London Underground during a far-right march. This is consistent with Zempi and Awan's research on gendered Islamophobia, which describes the "triple penalty" of Islamophobia, racism, and misogyny[43] faced by Muslim women.

[43]Zempi, I. and Awan, I. (2016). Islamophobia: Lived Experiences of Online and Offline Victimisation. Policy Press.

The consequences of this targeting extend beyond the incidents themselves. Respondents described modifying their visible Muslim identity as a protective strategy:

"My wife has stopped wearing an abaya on the days she goes to work on the train because of all of the attacks."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 35–44

"I've started wearing more neutral clothing in certain places. I notice I do it automatically now. That bothers me."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54

Far-right intimidation:
Respondents told us how three men harassed a hijab-wearing woman in a town centre car park, repeatedly referencing the EDL; and colleagues in a workplace expressing support for the "Unite the Kingdom" rally organised by far-right agitator, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon.

The 'go back home' trope:
Multiple respondents described being told to leave the country. One man (second-generation, born in the UK) recounted a conversation that pivoted without warning into a suggestion he should "go back home to your family." He replied: "Yes, I regularly go home in Luton and visit my family. Thank you for asking."
(Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54)

"I've been sworn at multiple times, and you have things like going into a supermarket and people whispering disgusting racist things under their breath as they walk past you."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

"An incident on the train travelling to work where someone had a full-on rant about Muslims whilst sitting opposite me saying disgusting things and not a single person said anything."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

In some cases, the hostility extended to the domestic sphere:
"Someone put a note through my door that said 'your kind aren't welcome here'. I am the only woman in my street who wears a hijab."
(Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44)

Institutional double standards:
One respondent drew attention to what he perceived as unequal treatment of political expression: "The way that Palestine flags were taken down so quickly every time they were put up but the ['raise the colours' flags] haven't. There is even one outside [...] mosque."
(Survey respondent, Muslim man, 18–24)

4.3 The workplace: A hidden crisis

62%

of Muslim respondents said they experienced or witnessed racism or Islamophobia at work

75%

of Muslim respondents did not have, or were unsure whether they had, a trusted person at work to turn to about racism or Islamophobia

Survey results showed the workplace as the most significant institutional setting for Islamophobia. 121 of 195 Muslim respondents (62%) reported experiencing or witnessing racism or Islamophobia in the workplace. This included 53 who said they had experienced it personally, 33 who reported both experiencing and witnessing it, and 35 who said they had witnessed it. Among those for whom the question was applicable (excluding the 14 who said 'not applicable'), the rate rises to 67%.

The scale of this finding cannot be attributed to a handful of bad employers or isolated incidents. With 121 Muslim respondents — the majority of those for whom the question was applicable — reporting workplace Islamophobia, the data describes a systemic pattern. It is particularly notable that 86 respondents said they had personally experienced it (either alone or alongside witnessing it). This is not a problem confined to specific sectors or workplaces; it pervades the employment experience of Muslim workers in Luton.

Respondents described specific incidents:

"My manager stated that we had too many hijabi staff and it made our clients uncomfortable."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 55–64

"People purposely not calling me by my proper name, comments made about being a terrorist, hijab being mocked."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54

"I'm scared of losing my job if I talk about this."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

Fear of professional repercussions is a documented barrier to reporting workplace discrimination, and it suppresses the data that institutions use to assess the scale of the problem. When people are afraid to speak, the silence is mistaken for the absence of a problem.

Another respondent described what happened when she did report:

"I reported Islamophobic comments from a client to my manager and his solution was to move me off the account."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 55–64

The forms of workplace Islamophobia described by respondents extended beyond overt hostility to the denial of religious practice:

"I'm denied 5 minutes for prayer but other people can go out and smoke."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 55–64

The survey also asked whether respondents had someone they could talk to at work if they were worried about racism or Islamophobia. Among applicable Muslim respondents, only 25% said 'yes'. 47% said 'no' and a further 28% were 'not sure' — meaning that three-quarters of Muslim workers in our sample either had no trusted person to turn to or did not know whether they did. This figure contextualises the fear expressed above. When most Muslim workers do not have a trusted person within their workplace, the conditions for silence and suppression are structural, not incidental.

4.4 Public services: Fractured trust

The survey asked respondents whether they felt treated fairly and with respect by the National Health Service (NHS), the Council, and the Police. The findings below are from Muslim respondents' responses.

For the NHS, the majority reported positive or mixed experiences. 45 said 'always' and 54 said 'often' (a combined 51%), while 69 said 'sometimes' (35%) and 27 said 'rarely' or 'never' (14%). The qualitative accounts reveal a more troubling picture:

> **"I went to the hospital to see the urgent GP… the GP, a white British man, was very dismissive, did not listen really to what I was saying, was packing his bag up to go home and would not look me in my eyes… Part of me felt that if I wasn't a hijabi woman he may have given me more attention."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 25–34

> **"Often when visiting the GP with my mum, I have gotten into heated confrontations with non-Asian workers, as they tend to be rude to my mother once she begins speaking — English is not her first language."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim man, under 18

For the Council, trust sat between the NHS and the Police. 27 Muslim respondents said 'always' and 46 said 'often' (a combined 37%), but 45 (23%) said 'rarely' or 'never'. This is a significant minority expressing dissatisfaction with an institution responsible for housing, education oversight, social services, and the local equality agenda. Given that the Council is the body best positioned to implement many of the recommendations in this report, this finding carries particular weight.

For the Police, trust was notably lower. 74 of 195 Muslim respondents (38%) said they were 'rarely' or 'never' treated fairly and with respect. The qualitative responses were pointed:

"Police aren't bothered at all. One woman was rolling her eyes at me when I had an accident just because I had an Islamic dress on."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 25–34

"I find the police systematically racist."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

"There is a disconnect with the police service — often if a criminal act has happened to a Muslim, the law tends to disregard the seriousness of the offence."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54

These views are consistent with broader evidence. At a Bedfordshire Police and Crime Panel meeting in March 2024, Councillor Basit Mahmood reported a 335% increase in anti-Muslim hate crime in the preceding four months and described a 'crisis of confidence' in policing, noting that an estimated 60% of crimes went unreported[44]. Nationally, victim satisfaction with police handling of hate crime has fallen to 40%[45].

"I didn't bother reporting as there's no point. It's written for statistics and formality and nothing done."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

[44]Luton Today (2024). "Zero tolerance for hate crimes says Bedfordshire Police as meeting told incidents reached 'record levels'", 19 March 2024.
[45]Crime Survey for England and Wales (2022–2025). Hate crime estimates, Office for National Statistics.

4.5 Support after incidents: The gap

89% of Muslim respondents who said they had experienced or witnessed Islamophobia said they received no support afterwards

Perhaps the most troubling finding in the survey relates to what happens after someone experiences Islamophobia. Among the 183 Muslim respondents who reported experiencing or witnessing Islamophobia in any setting, 162 (89%) said they had not received any support afterwards — whether from their workplace, school, friends, or the wider community. Even among the 21 who answered 'yes', several described the support they received as 'none', suggesting the true figure may be higher still. Across the institutions examined in this report — the NHS, the Council, the Police, schools, and workplaces — the formal infrastructure for responding to Islamophobia is, for the vast majority of those who encounter it, functionally absent.

"There isn't any point because nothing is done and nobody cares or even wants to do anything. Sometimes even when you do tell people they just make you feel like you're overreacting or tell you that you misunderstood, as if we are completely stupid."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

The experience described above was echoed across the survey. Among those who did report, the outcome was frequently described as failing to produce meaningful results.

"I reported it to the police, they gave a log number and then nothing happened."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

Among those who did not report, the reasoning was consistent:

> **"I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want to go through it all because I knew it wouldn't be taken seriously."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54

Remi Joseph-Salisbury's research on racism in English secondary schools (2020) identified a parallel dynamic: when institutions fail to act on racism, they communicate to those affected that their experiences are not legitimate. This produces not apathy but what Joseph-Salisbury describes as a "rational withdrawal"[46]. This is the calculation that reporting will lead nowhere or will result in further harm. The result is a cycle in which institutional inaction generates underreporting, and underreporting is then cited as evidence that the problem is not serious.

Our data illustrates this cycle directly. Among Muslim respondents who answered the question relating to schools, 70% reported experiencing or witnessing Islamophobia in school settings. Despite this widespread exposure, when the same respondents were asked whether they had a trusted adult at school to turn to, only 23% said they did, 49% said they had no one and 28% were unsure. The gap was starker still among Muslim respondents aged under 25 — those most likely to still be in educational settings day-to-day — of whom only 17% identified a trusted adult. The coexistence of widespread experience and minimal support infrastructure is the type of institutional failure that Joseph-Salisbury's framework predicts.

[46]Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020). Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools. Runnymede Trust.

4.6 Beyond the Muslim community

Although this report centres the experiences of Muslim respondents, the survey also captured the perspectives of 14 non-Muslim residents. This cohort is too small for statistical generalisation, but their individual responses provide important qualitative corroboration.

Of the 14 who responded, seven reported witnessing Islamophobia in at least one setting, and five said they themselves felt 'less safe' or 'less welcome' over the preceding six months. Across the free-text responses, at least nine of the 14 non-Muslim respondents acknowledged, witnessed, or expressed concern about anti-Muslim hatred:

"I am shocked by how openly people are racist and I know my muslim friends really feel it."
Survey respondent, non-Muslim man, 55–64

"More people openly racist. They say they hate Muslims but we know that it's just all people of colour."
Survey respondent, non-Muslim man, 45–54

These accounts are significant for two reasons. Firstly, they independently corroborate the patterns reported by Muslim respondents of workplace hostility, open racism, and institutional inaction, from the position of observers rather than targets.

Secondly, they demonstrate the "social dimension of everyday racism"[47]. This refers to the understanding that racism structures the environment for everyone within it, not only for those at whom it is directed. When non-Muslim respondents report feeling less safe, witnessing casual anti-Muslim hostility in the workplace, and recognising inadequate institutional responses, they are describing a shared civic space that has

[47]Essed, P. (1991). Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory.

been degraded by racism. The respondent's observation reveals the understanding that hatred nominally aimed at Muslims is understood by other communities of colour as aimed at them too. Islamophobia does not sit in isolation; it draws on and feeds the same structures of racial exclusion that target other minoritised groups[48].

"I am also concerned about the rise of racism and Islamophobia, which I know is affecting others."
Survey respondent, non-Muslim woman, 55–64

[48]Meer, N. and Modood, T. (2012). "For 'Jewish' read 'Muslim'?" Islamophobia Studies Journal, 1(1).

5. What school pupils told us

As part of this research, FACES Luton and The Raise Up Foundation facilitated a group discussion with school pupils in Luton, exploring two questions: "What does Islamophobia mean?" and "What does Islamophobia look like?" The responses demonstrate a sophisticated, grounded understanding of how Islamophobia operates in their lives.

5.1 Defining Islamophobia

When asked what Islamophobia means, pupils described it as:

- **Discrimination and unfair treatment:** "Discrimination against Muslims: being treated unfairly because of how you're perceived."
- **Marginalisation:** "Making Muslims feel marginalised: when you feel like you're not part of society or are being pushed out."
- **Prejudice:** "Prejudice against Muslims."

The pupils did not describe Islamophobia as individual rudeness or ignorance. They described it as structural — as a system that operates through perception, marginalisation, and exclusion. This aligns closely with the APPG's working definition[49] and with Sayyid and Vakil's theorisation of Islamophobia as the "problematisation of the Muslim presence".[50]

> **"My cousin was called a terrorist in school and the school just made him shake hands with the other boy."**
> Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 18–24

[49]All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018). Islamophobia Defined.
[50]Sayyid, S. and Vakil, A. (2010). Thinking Through Islamophobia. C. Hurst & Co.

5.2 What Islamophobia looks like

When asked to describe what Islamophobia looks like in practice, the pupils' responses revealed seven interconnected themes:

- **Isolation and pressure to conform:** "Feeling isolated and pressured to fit in."
- **Fear and unequal prospects:** "Fear of judgement and knowing I'll have a harder time."
- **Collective blame:** "When one person does something bad, we're all blamed."

This echoes what scholars describe as the essentialisation of Muslim identity — the reduction of an entire community to a monolithic bloc.

- **Media representation:** "Media showing Muslims in a bad light, e.g. the terrorist, which over time made people think Muslims are awful."

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model[51] captures the mechanism by which mainstream media embed meanings into coverage of Islam that audiences absorb as common sense.

- **Scapegoating:** "When Islam is blamed for everything."
- **Community hostility:** "People thinking Muslims 'ruin our community'."
- **Dehumanisation:** "When people don't see them as actual people; they see Muslims as another species, but we're not, we're the same as them."

"I was called a paki by a white student, while I was attending [...] School. When I attempted to retaliate, I was stopped by the teacher and sent to the head's office. The case was subsequently dismissed under the reasoning of us being young."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 18–24

[51]Hall, S. (1973). Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.

Research on Islamophobic bullying in schools, though still sparse, suggests that around one in four Muslim students aged 13–15 in the UK report experiencing bullying linked to their religion[52]. MEND's Islamophobia Response Unit has received reports of abuse targeting children as young as four[53]. Joseph-Salisbury's 2020 Runnymede Trust report[54] describes racism in schools as 'institutional and endemic'. He draws attention to the impact of the Prevent Duty, which teachers found deeply problematic. There is ongoing concern about its impact on minoritised students, and specifically Muslim and South Asian students in particular, given that evidence suggests that Prevent produces 'highly racialised surveillance of Muslim and South Asian pupils'[55].

The young people expressed a deep scepticism that anything would change. The quote that opened this report bears repeating:

"Everybody knows, but nobody does anything. We don't matter."

It is the rational conclusion of young people who have watched adults fail to protect them.

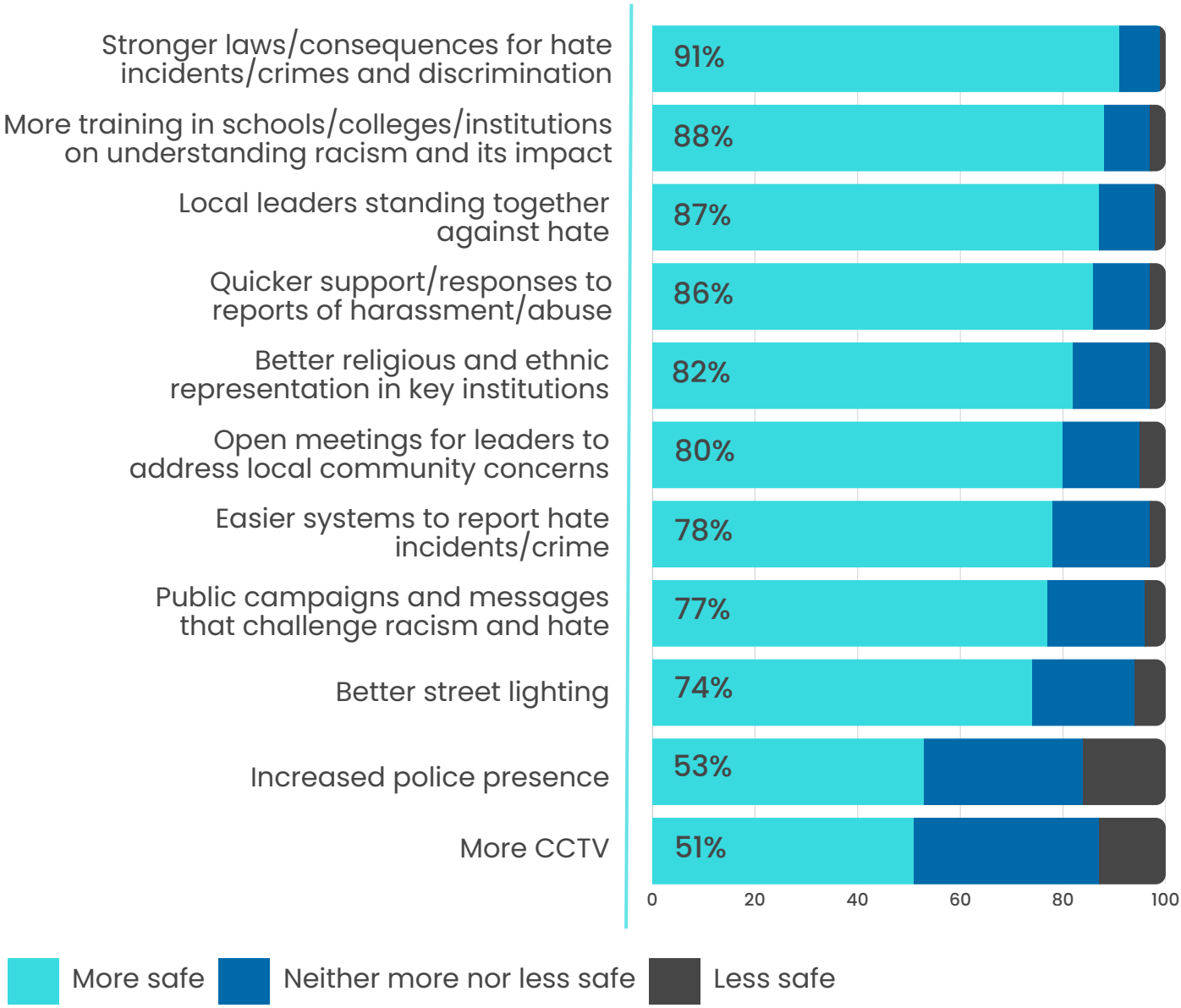
[52]Francis & McKenna (2018). "The Experience of Victimisation among Muslim Adolescents in the UK: The Effect of Psychological and Religious Factors." Religions, 9(8), 243.
[53]Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) (2020). Racism within UK Schools.
[54]Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2020). Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools. Runnymede Trust.
[55]Claire Alexander and William Shankley, "Ethnic Inequalities in the State Education System in England," in Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation, ed. Bridget Byrne, Claire Alexander, Omar Khan, James Nazroo, and William Shankley (Bristol: Policy Press, 2020).

6. Community priorities

We asked survey respondents what would make them feel safer and more welcome in Luton. The responses were oriented toward systemic, institutional change. The findings below are drawn from all 209 respondents.

6.1 What would help you feel safer in Luton?

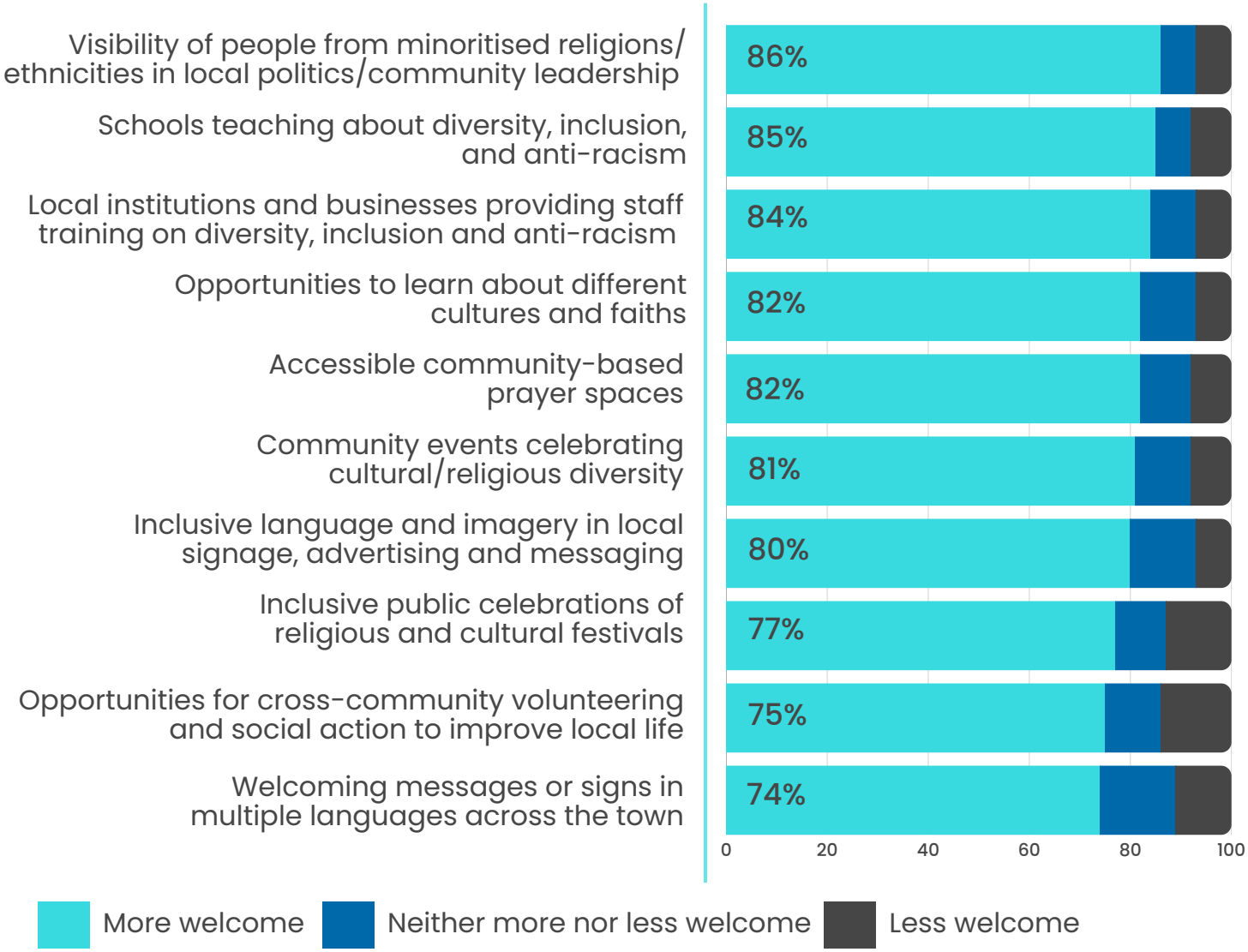
Responses produced the following results, highlighting stronger consequences, training, solidarity, responsive services, and representation among measures which could improve local safety.



16% of survey respondents stated increased police presence would make them feel less safe, the highest selected 'less safe' answer. A further 31% said it would make no difference either way; nearly half of all respondents (47%) did not see more police as something that would improve their safety.

6.2 What would help you feel more welcome in Luton?

Respondents were asked which measures would help them feel more welcome in Luton. The responses showed a priority placed on representation, education, and institutional training, indicating respondents understand Islamophobia as a systemic issue requiring systemic responses.



Measures involving more public-facing expressions of diversity received somewhat lower, though still substantial, support. The highest selected 'less welcome' answers were cross-community volunteering (14%) and inclusive public celebrations of religious and cultural festivals (13%).

"Better representation across all levels of public services, not just in community liaison roles."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 55-64

The pattern produced in these responses show stronger endorsement towards structural measures: representation within institutions, training that equips staff to recognise and challenge racism, and educational curricula, addressing the matters of safety and welcome systemically, rather than through efforts to change individual attitudes. The measures that attracted greater ambivalence are those that risk what Ahmed (2012) describes as the "performance of diversity"[56] — visible displays of inclusion that can coexist comfortably with unchanged institutional cultures. Respondents appear to distinguish between structural change and symbolic gesture, and to prioritise the former. This is consistent with the evidence throughout this report: that discrimination is reproduced through institutional structures and normalised practices, and that it is at that level where intervention is most needed.

"We have the council and others organise food and gifts for children at Christmas but never for Eid even though so many children are Muslims."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 55–64

[56]Ahmed, S. (2012). On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Duke University Press.

When asked whether people in Luton look out for each other, responses were divided: 24% said 'yes', 33% said 'maybe', 31% said 'no', and 12% said 'don't know'. Asked whether they had experienced acts of kindness or support from someone outside their usual social network in the last six months, 41% said they had. These findings suggest that community solidarity in Luton is not absent, but it is unevenly experienced and cannot be relied upon as a substitute for institutional action.

6.3 In their own words

When given space to describe in their own words what would help, respondents called for:

"Police taking Islamophobia more seriously."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

"Recognising the contribution of Muslims to the betterment of building Luton's ethnic diversity, education, industry, services, healthcare."
Survey respondent, Muslim man, 45–54

"Better representation and empowerment of females from ethnic minorities in key institutions."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

"Working with our communities to create proper anti-racist training — not just on hate crimes or 'lived experience', because it's much more than that."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 35–44

7. Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are guided by a single test: will they produce measurable change in how institutions operate?

Each recommendation is designed to address structural Islamophobia. 'Structural' means practices that can survive changes in leadership, sit within policies and systems, name a clear mechanism for change, and can be tested against evidence rather than intention. Commitments adopted because they serve an institution's interest can be quietly withdrawn when that interest shifts; this is why we favour mechanisms that are documented, public, and externally reviewable over commitments that rest on goodwill alone.

Throughout this report, we have distinguished between **attitudinal** and **institutional** responses. An attitudinal response treats Islamophobia as a matter of individual prejudice and seeks to address it through awareness, dialogue and goodwill. An institutional response recognises that Islamophobia can also be embedded in decision-making, complaints processes, data collection, safeguarding, employment practices and the distribution of power.

The first is simpler to carry out and easier to declare complete. The second is more complex, slower and more demanding. But it is the second that the evidence in this report calls for.

Structural racism often operates through ordinary policies and procedures which result in inequitable outcomes and impact, even where intent is not openly discriminatory. That is why these recommendations focus on systems: uniforms, behaviour policies, complaints, progression, clinical pathways, procurement, scrutiny and data. These are the places where institutional change must be made visible.

The recommendations below are organised by the institution best placed to act. They are not exhaustive. They are intended as practical starting points: concrete commitments that can be tracked, reviewed and tested over time. Each institution named should be able to answer four questions:

- Who is responsible?
- What will change?
- By when?
- How will the public know?

Several recommendations below call for institutional training. What we mean by this is structured education about what racism is, how it operates, and how it produces unequal outcomes — not generic equality, diversity and inclusion sessions focused on individual awareness. There is now a substantial evidence base showing that conventional diversity and unconscious-bias training has limited effect on institutional outcomes and can sometimes be counterproductive,[57] while structural interventions and sustained education embedded in institutional practice have a stronger evidence base for producing measurable change[58]. As Sara Ahmed has argued, "doing diversity" can become a substitute for structural change rather than a route to it[59].

[57]Dobbin, F. and Kalev, A. (2016). "Why diversity programs fail." Harvard Business Review, July–August 2016; and (2018) "Why doesn't diversity training work? The challenge for industry and academia." Anthropology Now, 10(2), 48–55. See also: Chang, E.H., Milkman, K.L., Gromet, D.M., Rebele, R.W., Massey, C., Duckworth, A.L. and Grant, A.M. (2019). "The mixed effects of online diversity training." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116(16), 7778–7783; and Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018). Unconscious bias training: an assessment of the evidence for effectiveness.
[58]Dobbin and Kalev (2016), as above; Paluck, E.L., Porat, R., Clark, C.S. and Green, D.P. (2021). "Prejudice reduction: progress and challenges." Annual Review of Psychology, 72, 533–560.
[59]Ahmed, S. (2012). On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Duke University Press

Luton Borough Council

1 **Adopt the APPG working definition of Islamophobia** and embed it in the Council's operational architecture within twelve months. Adoption alone is symbolic. Embedding means the definition appears in equality impact assessments, complaints procedures, procurement standards, commissioning frameworks, and staff conduct policies. It means a complaint that meets the definition is treated as a complaint of racism, not as a separate or lesser category. A community comprising one-third of Luton's population should see itself recognised in how the Council does its work, not only in what it says about its work.

2 **Establish an annually published Community Safety and Cohesion Report co-produced with local community organisations.** The report should disaggregate hate-incident and community-safety data by faith, ethnicity, gender, and ward, drawing on community-reported incidents alongside official figures. Officer-level responsibility for the report should be named publicly, and the report should be presented annually to a formal scrutiny committee, with community partners as full participants, able to question officers and record formal recommendations, not only in attendance. Data that is collected and shelved reproduces the very dynamic this report describes.

3 **Resource existing local expertise.** Luton has community organisations, academic researchers, and faith-based practitioners with deep expertise in the experiences this report documents. The Council should commission and fund this expertise on a sustained basis — for research, for institutional review, and for the design and delivery of anti-racism work — rather than relying on it being provided unpaid in moments of crisis.

For Schools, Colleges, and Educational Institutions

1 **Implement sustained, curriculum-embedded anti-racism education developed with specialist input.** 88% of all respondents identified this as the most strongly sought measure within schools' remit. This means investing in teachers' professional development through properly funded programmes led by people with expertise in anti-racist pedagogy, and reviewing curriculum content for the ways in which it reproduces or challenges racialised narratives about Muslims.

2 **Ensure that every pupil has access to a trusted adult with the confidence and training to act on disclosures of racism and Islamophobia.** Following racist and/or Islamophobic incidents, only 17% of young Muslim respondents could identify a trusted adult at school. Every pupil should have access to a trained adult who is empowered to act, with attention to the specific experiences of Muslim girls, who may face both racialised and gendered harassment. This should be someone who can receive a disclosure, initiate an appropriate response, and follow up with the young person afterwards. When disclosures lead to meaningful intervention, pupils learn that speaking up is worthwhile. This builds the trust that is currently low or absent.

3 **Establish clear, transparent procedures for responding to Islamophobic bullying, including recording, investigation, and sanctions that are consistent with the school's response to other forms of racism.** Where schools embed these procedures into daily practice (and governing bodies actively monitor compliance) anti-racist policy becomes a lived reality rather than a commitment that exists on paper only. This demonstrates to staff and pupils that Islamophobia is treated with the same seriousness as any other form of racism.

For Bedfordshire Police

1 **Conduct an honest institutional audit of how Islamophobic incidents are classified, investigated, and followed up.** This should include whether incidents targeting visibly Muslim women, at whom much street-level hostility is directed, are recorded and pursued consistently. 38% of Muslim respondents said police 'rarely' or 'never' treated them fairly. An audit will help rebuild trust and address the structural roots of the crisis of confidence in policing among Muslim communities. Findings should be made available to the public. Where the audit identifies failures, visible consequences and structural reform will demonstrate the force's commitment to change. Transparency at this level would signal a genuine willingness to be held accountable by the communities the police serve.

2 **Ensure that every reported Islamophobic incident results in a documented outcome communicated to the victim.** The current experience described by respondents is one where reporting leads nowhere, which in turn makes future reporting less likely.

3 **Better utilise the existing Independent Advisory Groups by ensuring they are visible, accessible, and able to act.** An overarching theme across responses was a lack of support, and a lack of knowledge about who to turn to for help. Bedfordshire Police already operates Independent Advisory Groups covering Luton, alongside a Chief Constable's advisory panel, which are intended to bring community perspectives into policing. However, these structures are largely invisible and inaccessible to members of the public. For them to serve Luton's communities, residents need to be able to find and use them. A clear outward-facing role would address this: membership and terms of reference should be published, alongside a clear public route for residents to raise concerns.

Where possible (subject to genuine constraints of individual privacy and operational sensitivity) the issues these groups raise should be minuted and placed in the public domain. Where they raise a pattern of concern — for example, about how Islamophobic incidents are classified, investigated and resolved — the force should be required to provide a documented response from a named senior officer within a fixed period, also on public record. Advice that the force may receive and set aside, unseen, cannot rebuild the confidence this report has shown to be absent.

For Employers

1 **Ensure reporting mechanisms trigger appropriate action so that workplace Islamophobia receives an institutional response.** Creating a confidential reporting mechanism is a necessary first step. To make it effective, employers should commit to investigating complaints independently, protecting complainants from retaliation, taking disciplinary action where discrimination is substantiated, and improving systems and processes where Islamophobia is systemic.

When staff see that reporting leads to fair, transparent outcomes, confidence in the process grows and organisational culture can shift. As one respondent put it:

"There should be real consequences for Islamophobic behaviour at work. Currently the institution is protected and the person harmed is managed around the problem."
(Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 45–54)

Another respondent said she was "scared of losing my job if I talk about this." Addressing that fear is the employer's responsibility, and the test of whether a reporting mechanism means anything at all.

2 **Commission anti-racism education that is specific to Islamophobia, developed by subject experts, and embedded in ongoing professional development rather than delivered as a standalone session.** This education should equip managers and staff to recognise the particular forms of discrimination described in this report — and to intervene confidently when they encounter them. This kind of targeted, sustained investment in professional learning produces lasting behavioural change in ways that one-off sessions cannot.

For NHS Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes

1 **Conduct a structured review of how Muslim patients, particularly women wearing hijab and those with limited English, experience healthcare in Luton.** This should be led by independent researchers or practitioners with expertise in health inequalities and structural racism. Crucially, its findings should translate directly into concrete changes to clinical training, complaints handling, and patient advocacy — with named leads, timelines, and public reporting on progress.

2 **Commission Islamophobia and anti-racism training for senior leaders, managers, and those shaping organisational policy.** 14% of Muslim respondents reported that the NHS 'rarely' or 'never' treated them fairly, with specific concerns raised about maternity and women's healthcare. Training should be co-produced with Muslim community partners, embedded in leadership development, and linked to accountability mechanisms (e.g. Workforce Race Equality Standard).

For All Partners

1 **Stand together publicly and consistently against Islamophobia, and substantiate solidarity with institutional commitment.** 87% of all respondents said this would make them feel safer. Public statements carry greatest weight when accompanied by internal action. Partners should jointly commit to reviewing their own policies, practices, and workforce composition, and to publishing the results. Solidarity that is visible both publicly and internally builds the credibility that communities are asking for.

2 **Invest in community-led research and monitoring, and in the local expertise that makes it possible.** This report was produced through the voluntary efforts of three community organisations. That a community comprising one-third of Luton's population must document its own experiences of racism without institutional support points to a gap in how local intelligence is gathered and resourced. Statutory bodies should ensure that community-led research is commissioned, funded, and integrated into local decision-making, not as a one-off response to this report, but as a standing commitment to hearing from communities whose experiences are consistently underrepresented in official data.

3 **Redress imbalances in leadership and governance, committing to executive progression audits and community accountability.** 86% of all respondents emphasised the need for visible representation of people from minoritised religious and ethnic groups in leadership positions. Whole-staff metrics can mask lower levels of diverse representation within senior and leadership roles. They therefore cannot be used to accurately measure representation and related equitable recruitment practices, internal opportunities for development and promotion, and other

factors which may create barriers for minoritised groups or favour majority groups.

Diversifying leadership is a vital step, but research shows that representation can be used by institutions to signal equity while leaving underlying power structures untouched[60], and therefore cannot, in itself, change institutional culture. Equity requires moving beyond symbolic recruitment to embed permanent, ongoing community-led governance.

Partners should commit to:

- **Executive progression audits** to track, disaggregate, and publish senior-tier data, explicitly identifying the promotion bottlenecks that restrict Muslim and minoritised staff from reaching executive and board-level positions.

- **Community accountability**, establishing independent, public-facing scrutiny panels and monitoring frameworks. These mechanisms will ensure that institutional policy and strategy are actively co-produced with and held accountable by the community, rather than merely managed on their behalf.

[60]Ahmed, S. (2012). On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Duke University Press.

8. Conclusion

The data in this report paints a picture of a community under sustained pressure. Muslim residents of Luton are experiencing Islamophobia at work, in the street, in healthcare settings, schools, and on public transport. They are watching it happen to their families, friends, and neighbours. More than half of Muslim respondents feel less safe than they did six months ago. The vast majority who experience it receive no support. And their trust in the institutions that should protect them is deeply fractured.

These are not new problems. Luton's Muslim community has lived with the far-right for decades. What is new is the scale, the velocity, and the political normalisation. When a young person tells us that everybody knows, but nobody does anything, she is describing a lack of action — a failure of the adults and institutions around her to match what they already know with what they are willing to do.

That gap is the subject of this report. We did not set out to prove that Islamophobia exists in Luton, because "everybody knows". We set out to record the local experience, understand its prevalence, context and the environments where it operates, and to put it in front of organisations and leaders with the power, authority and responsibility to make positive change.

Unfortunately, this report is not evidence that Muslim communities have been heard. It is the test of whether they will be.

Luton has already diagnosed its own structural inequality. The Council's 2019 Inclusive Growth Commission[61] named poverty and inequality as the town's central challenge, and Luton 2040[62] — the town's shared vision for the future — commits Luton to becoming "a healthy, fair and sustainable town where everyone can thrive, and no one has to live in poverty." That ambition cannot be met while residents of our town experience what this

[61]Luton Borough Council (2019). Final Report of the Luton Inclusive Growth Commission
[62]Luton 2040 (2020). A Town-Wide Vision for Luton 2020–2040

report describes. The test of the town's commitment to fairness is not whether it is stated, but whether it is extended — visibly and accountably — to every part of Luton's population, including its Muslim community.

This report should concern everyone who has a stake in this town's future — not just the town's Muslims — everyone who lives or works here, and every institution that serves it. A town that allows the safety and belonging of one part of its community to erode is not a safe or welcoming town for anyone. The disorder of summer 2024 demonstrated how quickly that erosion can turn into open violence, and how high the cost is when it does.

The questions we put to the institutions named in the recommendations: Who is responsible? What will change? By when? How will the public know? They are not rhetorical questions, and we do not intend to let those questions fade. We will return to them, tracking what each institution has done in response, and reporting publicly on that progress. A report that is read and shelved would reproduce the very pattern these pages describe. This one is intended as the beginning of an accountable process, not the end of a conversation.

"Everybody knows, but nobody does anything. We don't matter."
School pupil, Luton

9. Afterword: A note on terminology

Statutory partners across the UK, including local authorities, NHS bodies, education providers, and policing institutions, are now considering whether to adopt the UK Government's non-statutory definition of 'anti-Muslim hostility' within their policies, equality impact assessments, training, and data recording frameworks. The definition[63] was published on 9 March 2026, drawing on the advice of an independent Working Group, and describes anti-Muslim hostility as the intentional encouragement or commission of criminal acts, prejudicial stereotyping, and unlawful discrimination directed at Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim. Notably, the Government adopted the term 'anti-Muslim hostility' in place of 'Islamophobia', the term that had featured in the Working Group's own remit and title. It justified the change on the grounds that 'hostility' centres conduct rather than belief, and Muslims as individuals rather than Islam as a religion.

That choice of language is important, given that it will shape how anti-Muslim prejudice is named, measured, and acted upon in practice. This report therefore sets out a community-informed perspective on the decision before it becomes embedded at a local level, and explains why we continue to use 'Islamophobia' throughout rather than 'anti-Muslim hostility'. We contend that the former better reflects the language, experiences, and frameworks of the communities documented in this research.

We welcome the principle of government recognition. For too long, the absence of a formal definition allowed anti-Muslim hatred to go unnamed, unmeasured, and unaddressed at an institutional level. The Government's acknowledgement that Muslim communities, and younger Muslims and Muslim women in particular, carry a disproportionate burden of hostility is a meaningful step, and it gives affected communities an advocacy resource they did not previously have. Our continued use of 'Islamophobia' is nonetheless a deliberate one, and we want to be transparent about why.

[63]Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2026). A Definition of Anti-Muslim Hostility. gov.uk, 9 March 2026.

'Islamophobia' remains the universally recognised term, in academic scholarship, in civil society, and among affected communities, for the form of racism that targets Muslims, those perceived to be Muslim, and expressions of Muslimness. It is the term used by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims in their 2018 definition[64], which was endorsed by over 800 community organisations, more than 100 academics, and every major political party except the then-governing Conservative Party. It is the term used by the Runnymede Trust since 1997[65]. It is the term used by Tell MAMA, by the Muslim Council of Britain, and by the communities whose experiences this report documents. When our respondents described what they had experienced, they called it Islamophobia. We use the language of the communities we serve.

We are aware that the term 'Islamophobia' has its critics. We acknowledge that debate exists around its etymology and scope. But we would also argue that criticism of the term is often semantic and, in some cases, is deployed in ways that appear aimed at delegitimising the phenomenon by contesting the label. This approach has been observed in other related debates. The term 'antisemitism' has faced similar objections — that it is etymologically imprecise, that it conflates race and religion, that it is too broad. The term 'homophobia' has also been challenged on the grounds that it implies a clinical phobia rather than structural prejudice. In neither case have such objections led to the abandonment of a term that has become essential to naming, understanding, and combating the hatred it describes.

We also note serious concerns about the government's new definition itself. The definition conspicuously omits any explicit reference to race, despite the fact that, as the scholarly consensus and the APPG definition both make clear, Islamophobia operates as a form of racism. While the accompanying guidance acknowledges the process of racialisation, the definition itself treats race and religion as distinct, stopping short of naming Islamophobia as the racialised phenomenon it is. This omission was reportedly a point of significant contention within the Working Group itself. Without an explicit acknowledgement that anti-Muslim hostility is

[64]All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims (2018). Islamophobia Defined.
[65]Runnymede Trust (1997). Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All.

rooted in racism, the definition risks obscuring the structural and systemic dimensions of the very problem it seeks to address.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), the UK's largest Muslim umbrella body, has declined to endorse the definition, citing concerns about dilution from the Independent Working Group's original recommendations, a lack of meaningful engagement with grassroots Muslim communities, and a broader absence of transparency in the process[66]. The MCB has noted that the APPG definition of Islamophobia remains the most widely recognised and adopted definition in the UK to date.

Furthermore, as the academic Tahir Abbas[67] has argued, the definition must be understood within the broader framework in which it sits. The government's social cohesion strategy, within which the definition was announced, subordinates community wellbeing to national security; framing social cohesion as, in the Prime Minister's own words, "a vital front in the resilience of our national security"[68]. When anti-Muslim hostility is defined and addressed within a securitised framework, it risks reinforcing the very perception it claims to challenge: that Muslims are inherently suspect, that protection of Muslims require management of Muslims, and that inclusion is conditional. Abbas describes this as a "double movement": addressing grievance precisely to prevent empowerment. The result, he argues, is not the elimination of Islamophobia through anti-Islamophobia governance, but the inadvertent reproduction of it.

Together, these issues speak directly to the experiences documented in this report. When respondents told us that they do not trust the police, that they see no point in reporting, that they feel watched and managed rather than protected, they were describing the lived consequences of a securitisation of Muslim communities. A definition that fails to

[66]Muslim Council of Britain (2026). MCB Response to Government Proposed 'Anti-Muslim Hostility' Definition. mcb.org.uk, 10 March 2026.
[67]Abbas, T. (2026). "Between Definition and Reality: Assessing the Prognosis for the UK's Anti-Muslim Hostility Framework." tahir-abbas.com, 11 March 2026.
[68]HM Government (2026). Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom. Published March 2026.

disentangle itself from that framework will struggle to earn the trust of those it is meant to serve.

We therefore retain the term 'Islamophobia' in this report. We do so out of fidelity: to the scholarship, to the communities we work with, and to the principle that the people who experience a form of hatred should have a central role in naming it. As the Macpherson[69] principles made clear, communities must be at the heart of defining the prejudice they face. That principle has not changed.

Definitions matter. But as the MCB has noted, success is measured in outcomes, not definitions. Whether the government's new terminology ultimately makes a difference will depend not on the words chosen, but on whether they lead to the structural, institutional, and cultural changes that the communities documented in this report are calling for.

"Muslims are an easy target for everything because you can say whatever you want about us and get away with it."
Survey respondent, Muslim woman, 18–24

[69]Macpherson, W. (1999). The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny. Cm 4262-I. London: The Stationery Office.

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Everybody Knows: Islamophobia, safety, and belonging in our town

June 2026