

Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism is now an issue that we cannot ignore. Prejudice against the Muslim community has been fuelled by leading politicians and by an incessant stream of negative press reporting. Muslims are continually represented as a threat or as holding alien values. We have seen the consequences; 61% of Britons now believe Islam is incompatible with British culture and 45% of Britons think there are too many Muslims in the UK. In Newham Islamophobic attacks have increased by 63% in a year.

It is with particular concern that we have witnessed the impact of the government's recent Counter Terrorism Act, and measures taken against so-called 'non-violent extremism' under the government strategy 'Prevent'.

Despite claims to the contrary, 'Prevent' almost exclusively targets young Muslims for the views they hold on religion or issues such as government foreign policy. Schools and teachers are cast in the role of spies on our young people. This is leading to increasing division and to a breakdown of trust in schools and colleges.

In neighbouring Waltham Forest, pupils were recently asked to complete surveys designed to provide clues to possible radicalisation. Despite claims to the contrary, these surveys were clearly aimed at Muslim children. In south Yorkshire, schools singled out black and ethnic minority pupils for monitoring for signs of 'radicalisation'— while suggesting white children were not at risk. There are increasing instances of families subjected to distress due to arbitrary monitoring despite there being no suggestion of violent intent.

There is no need for this kind of monitoring. Some young people are indeed subject to risk that requires immediate and appropriate action. However, there are existing safeguarding procedures in every local authority and public service that are designed for this.

Members of teachers' unions have recounted numerous examples, including in Newham, of pupils who are afraid to discuss issues openly for fear of being labelled as potential extremists. This is precisely a situation in which young people can feel isolated and where prejudice can remain unchallenged. Prevent has been universally condemned by teachers' unions, the National Union of Students, civil liberties' organisations and many others.

In Newham itself we have seen three students suspended from one college in a sequence of events that stemmed directly from student concerns over Prevent and Islamophobia. This is a college that has a well-earned reputation for standing against racism, prejudice and Islamophobia. We believe it is a local example of the divisive impact of the climate of Islamophobia and of the Prevent agenda. Parents have also raised concerns with regards to one school holding an open session to discuss how to recognise signs of radicalisation in primary school children. Another school rescinded a ban on the wearing of the jilbab after appeals from parents. A free school in Newham has moved to ban Friday prayers, forcing students to leave the site.

Such incidents are on the rise, and with Newham being such an ethnically diverse borough, Newham Council has a special responsibility. Newham has the second highest Muslim population of any borough in Britain and we should remember that 46% of Muslims live in the 10% most deprived districts in England and Wales. Young Muslims in particular face proven disadvantage in education and in employment.

It is deeply regrettable that Newham Council has implemented Prevent without discussion with community organisations and representatives, faith leaders, teachers unions or parents. In particular, the council made a particularly controversial appointment as the borough's Prevent lead that has had a deeply divisive impact in the Muslim community. We therefore urge the council to be transparent in its appointments related to Prevent and other counter terrorism related posts.

Most importantly, we call on the council to urgently discuss the issues raised by the implementation of Prevent with imams and faith leaders; community representatives and organisations; teachers' unions and parents.

Signatories (personal capacity) include:

Malia Bouattia, national officer NUS Black Students

Gargi Bhattacharyya, Vice-Chair UCU, University of East London

Tahir Talati, Chair of Mend Newham

Ian Hale, Assistant Secretary Newham Teachers Association

Imam Suhail Patel (Head Imam, Seven Kings Muslim Educational Trust)

Andreas Patsalos, President, University of East London Students Union

Amirah Mohamoud, Vice President Education, University of East London Student Union

Ana Ferreira, Student Governor, University of East London

Sam Nuttall, LGBT Officer, University of East London Student Union

Shakira Akhtar, President of University of East London Palestine Society

Miriam Scharf, Officer, Newham Teachers Association

Saba Shiraz, Black Members Officer, Birkbeck University Students' Union

Jon Warner, Education Officer, Birkbeck University Students' Union

David Muritu, UCU NEC member for black members

Brian Richardson, Assistant Secretary Unite Against Fascism

Yesim Deveci, Senior Lecturer, University of East London, Founder and former Director of Dost Centre for Young Refugees & Migrants

Rabbil Sikdar, Newham Labour Party, columnist Morning Star

Sian Berry, Green Party candidate for Mayor of London

Cllr Caroline Russell, Green Party #2 list candidate for London Assembly

Tamsin Omond, Green Party candidate, Newham

Rachel Collinson, Green Party candidate, Newham

Newham Monitoring Project

Nadim Miah, Newham Stop the War Coalition

Sam Strudwick, Unison rep, Barts Health NHS Trust

Imam Yunus Dudhwala (Head of Chaplaincy, Barts Health NHS Trust)

Imam Ilyas Patel (Head Imam, Azhar Masjid)

Imam Abdul Vahab (Head Imam, Plashet Grove Mosque)

Imam Abdul Mateen

Imam Hashim Waseem

Imam Muaaz Kapodrawi

Imam Khalil Laher

Imam Zubair Patel

Imam Aadil Patel

Imam Muhammed Hanif

Imam Sajid Patel

Imam Salim Patel

Imam Shokat Patel

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