Background to submission
1.1 Our testimony draws upon a project where we examined the political interests and political participation of young Muslims (aged 15-27) in Scotland. Through this research we have gained significant insights into barriers and possibilities encountered by young Muslims when engaging in politics and in public life, which we believe is valuable for the work of Citizenship and Civic Engagement Committee. Our final report from this project has been published here: https://research.ncl.ac.uk/media/sites/researchwebsites/youngmuslims/MuslimYouthScotland.pdf

In addition to the research on political participation, we also draw on other academic experiences of working with Muslims communities to broaden our contribution.

Key summary points
2.1 Everyday experiences of racism and Islamophobia are potentially very discouraging factors when it comes to facilitating the participation of young Muslims in public life.
2.2 Negative media and political representations of Muslims and the interpretations of government policies such as Prevent are damaging the confidence of young Muslims.
2.3 The reinforcement of gender stereotypes about Muslim women – both within the Muslim community and within society at large – present challenges for their broader engagement in public life.
2.4 There is significant potential for greater Muslim participation in public life based on the growing presence of Muslim role models in Scottish politics and society.
2.5 There is much potential for expanding and promoting the strong ethos that many young Muslims have for charity and volunteer work; drawing on and promoting their interest in global politics and utilising their transnational outlook to foster connections and dialogue around the world.

In response to the questions identified by the Committee, we respond in particular to questions 7 and 9 below:

How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?

3.1 From our research, we recommend that society can support civic engagement by taking more seriously the assets and strengths exhibited by young Muslims. Central, devolved and local government could all contribute here too. In our research, we identified the following strengths and assets amongst the young Muslim men and women who participated in the research:

3.2 Strong ethos for charity work and volunteering - A key - but under-recognised - way young Muslims engage in civic life is through charity work and volunteering. In our research, we found that the majority of our participants volunteered or did charity work, ranging from global to local charities and different forms of campaigning. A strong ethos for charity and volunteer work is a substantial asset of Muslim young people and has significant potential to promote political and civic participation. To harness its potential, Muslim young people need to receive greater recognition and publicity for the different ways they engage in charity work and help those in need.
Many of our participants combined international charity work with local charity issues demonstrating their concern for and interest in both international and local affairs. A number of participants asserted that in the face of negative stereotypes they thought it was important for young Muslims to demonstrate an involvement in local affairs, with local charity and volunteer work as a way of achieving this. Therefore, expanding the repertoire of volunteering and charity work could be a significant way to promote visible participation and assist with the integration – and recognition – of young Muslims and the valuable contributions they make to society.

3.3 **Strong concern about global political issues** - Our research has demonstrated that young Muslims frequently have a sharp awareness of, and a strong concern about, global political issues and matters. This, we believe, is an asset of Britain’s youthful Muslim community. Through promoting young Muslims’ interest in global politics, a new generation of global thinkers and international strategists can be fostered in the UK. Rather than discouraging the global outlook of young Muslims, these interests could be promoted and have the potential to provide an important platform for Muslims to participate in British public life.

3.4 **A transnational outlook (connected with family heritage/diaspora)** - Due to connections with diasporas and migrations, young Muslims frequently offer a transnational outlook; many convey connections with multiple places, facilitating networks between the UK and other parts of the world. In our globalised and interconnected times, a transnational outlook can be a major asset, helping to foster connections and dialogue with other countries and world regions. Young Muslims provide a distinct transnational outlook, which could be utilised and promoted to assist their participation in public life. Rather than perceiving migrant/diaspora connections in a negative light, there is an opportunity to nurture these transnational characteristics, which could open up new possibilities for young Muslims in UK society.

3.5 **Emerging Scottish Muslim role-models** – below, we state that a lack of suitable role models is a barrier to the participation of Muslims in public life. While we believe there is still a need for more Muslims to take an active role in public and political roles, we also believe that there is an emerging and growing presence of publically prominent Muslims and they are very important for engendering the participation of younger Muslims in public life. If those in public roles can foster good relations and contact with Muslim young people, acting as positive role models, it should greatly assist with the growing participation of Muslims in public Scottish life.

3.6 **A young and educated population** - In Scotland there is a growing Muslim population that is young and educated, with many signs of increasing confidence in the face of many barriers and prejudices. From our research, there are positive signs that many in this new generation are determined to engage in public life and make their voices and opinions heard. Therefore, an emerging aspirational youth is a growing asset and it should hopefully foster greater participation in public life and integration.

3.7 **The importance of locality** - We are primarily drawing from research carried out in Scotland and we have observed that many young Muslims believe that Scotland provides distinctive opportunities and challenges in terms of participating in public life compared to other places in the UK. For a number of our participants, there was a sense that Scottish politics – specifically the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Scottish nationalism - provides a distinct form of politics that is conducive to their participation and involvement in politics. Participants stated that they perceived SNP politics to be inclusive and distinctive from traditional Westminster political parties that had toxic legacies for some. This perceived distinctive form of politics resulted in a number of
participants engaging in politics and campaigning with/for the SNP. The contextual specificities of Scotland then, are assisting and encouraging some young Muslims to actively participate in politics and public life. What we hope this example demonstrates is that locality is important; where Muslims live can significantly impact on their desire and possibilities to participate in public life. While our example in Scotland demonstrates a context than can assist participation for some, other geographic contexts in the UK can function just as easily as a barrier to participation (or not). The history, political culture and society of certain locations can potentially make participation for Muslims a significant challenge compared to other areas. Therefore, we should consider the history, culture and the politics of places where Muslims live as potentially one of the biggest barriers to their participation in public life.

Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

4.1 From our research with young Muslim men and women in Scotland, we found the following barriers when it comes to them being active citizens and to engaging politically:

4.2 **Racism/Islamophobia** - From our research, everyday racism and Islamophobia present one of the most consistent and worrying experiences that young Muslims in Scotland have to negotiate. We find that such experiences intensity after terrorist incidents (regardless of where in the world these take place) and have increased as a result of Brexit. These everyday experiences of racism and Islamophobia work to discourage the active participation of some younger Muslims and is one of the biggest barriers to their participation in public life. That being said, some of our participants demonstrated tenacity in terms of how they managed and responded to racism and Islamophobia.

4.3 **Media and political representations about the ‘Muslim Community’** - Negative media and political representations about ‘Muslims Communities’ present significant barriers to the participation of young Muslims in public life. Muslim young people are sometimes discouraged from engaging in politics and public life out of a fear of being misrepresented and branded as “extremist” or non-patriotic for example. In many of our interviews, a frustration with how Muslims were represented in media and political narratives was expressed. There is a sense that the media and political parties only represent Muslims in a negative light, and pay little attention to their positive contributions to British society. Government policies such a Prevent are being used in such a way that suspicion is cast upon young Muslims, resulting in a level of apprehension with regard to political expression and general engagement in public life. Nonetheless, we have also observed that for some young Muslims, political participation and public engagement is perceived as a resource to challenge stereotypes and negative representations. In a number of interviews, participants asserted that they felt that there was a need for Muslims to engage in more prominent public roles in order to provide alternative narratives and re-represent the Muslim identity. Therefore, we have seen an emerging awareness that participation in politics and public life is a way to challenge stereotypes, Islamophobia and negative representations. However, it would appear that negative representations and stereotypes are more of a barrier than a motivation to participate in public life.

4.4 **A lack of appropriate role models** - A number of our participants referred to there being a lack of Muslim role models in prominent public and political positions and explained that this discouraged them from taking an active role in political affairs. We found that the small number of Muslims who are in publically prominent positions in Scotland often have a positive impact on the
aspirations and confidence of young Muslims. A number of participants highlighted that Muslim politicians such as Humza Yousaf were positive role models, providing them with confidence to participate in political affairs. However, the continued lack of Muslims in public and political roles means there is still a shortage of role models to inspire and engender confidence in young Muslims to engage in public life.

4.5 Gender stereotypes - We have found that women participants often felt that they had to deal with multiple prejudices based not only on religion but also gender, making their engagement in public life especially challenging. Gender norms within communities and the stereotyping of Muslim women tend to reinforce the idea that women should not participate in political affairs. Therefore, gender and everyday sexism should be considered as a key barrier to the participation of British Muslim women in public life. Nonetheless, we also observed a growing confidence in young Muslim women, with a number of participants engaging in politics and taking on publically prominent roles. There are positive signs then, that young Muslim women are rejecting and challenging gender prejudices and becoming visibly involved in politics and campaigning.

The team who did the research
Peter Hopkins is a Professor of Social Geography at Newcastle University and he has extensive experience of researching and writing about Muslims in Scotland and Islamophobia in the UK. His books include ‘Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging’ and ‘The Issue of Masculine Identities for British Muslim Identities after 9/11: A Social Analysis’.

Dr Robin Finlay is a Social and Cultural Geographer at Newcastle University and has growing experience of researching and writing about migration, diasporas and Muslim identities in the UK and Spain. His publications include ‘Narratives of Belonging: The Moroccan Diaspora in Granada, Spain’ and ‘Young Muslims Political Interests and Political Participations in Scotland’.

Dr Gurchathen Sanghera is a Lecturer in the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He has conducted research with Muslims in both England (particularly in Bradford) and Scotland. He has published on a range of issues connected to this including: social capital, gender relations and methodological issues.

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