Professor Peter Hopkins, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, in collaboration with Dr Katherine Botterill and Dr Gurchathen Sanghera – written evidence (CCE0080)

Background to submission - our comments here draw upon our Arts and Humanities Research Council project about the everyday experiences of Muslim and non-Muslim young people growing up in urban, suburban and rural Scotland. Overall this project worked with 382 young people from diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds including Muslim young, other South Asian youth (such as Sikhs, Hindus and non-religious South Asians), asylum seekers and refugees, international students, Central and Eastern European migrants and white Scottish youth. Most lived in Scotland’s main cities, but some were from Dumfries, Fife and Inverness. Our final report is available here: https://research.ncl.ac.uk/youngpeople/outputs/finalreport/

Key summary points

- Racism and Islamophobia are everyday experiences for many ethnic minority youth in Scotland. Efforts need to be made to challenge racism in order to prevent divisions within and between communities;
- Participants expressed a frustration with the ways in which Britain’s Asian communities are represented as lacking any internal diversity;
- Ethnic minority youth are interested in talking about politics and aware of political issues (including international, national and local politics); opportunities for them to engage in politics and in public life need to be made more transparent in order to maximise opportunities and awareness;
- For those who have engaged in political and public life, some were worried that they may be seen as too political or as radical and others still were frustrated by troubling stereotypes based on assumptions about their gender, race or social class. Simplistic stereotypes about Muslim young people in particular need to be challenged in order to enable them to participate in public life.

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

7. 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?

7.1 Resilience of young people - Although racism and Islamophobia were significant factors in the everyday lives of our participants, many young people demonstrated resilience to everyday racism and felt able to manage and respond to it. Racism needs to be challenged but the resilience demonstrated by young people is a significant strength that could be built upon to promote participation in public life.

7.2 Strong concern about and interest in global politics - Many of the young people involved in our research were passionate about and interested in global political issues. They engaged in debates
about such issues and were knowledgeable about the role of politicians and others in world affairs.

7.3 Strong ethic of care - Many of the young people who participated in our research demonstrated a strong ethic of care for others and expressed and practised this through a number of avenues such as: volunteering; community activism; and voicing a strong interest in political issues (international, national and local).

7.4 Politicised by the Scottish independence Referendum - Many young people in our research – including those who were previously not interested in politics – were politicised by the Scottish Independence Referendum and the lowering of the voting age to include 16 and 17 year olds. This engaged and interested cohort of young people are an asset and could be utilised in order to promote participation in public life.

9. 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?

9.1 From our research with diverse ethnic and religious minority young people as well as white young people, we found the following barriers when it comes to them being active citizens and to engaging politically:

9.2 Everyday racism - The vast majority of the ethnic minority youth who we have worked with in our research experienced racism; some experience it on a daily basis. These experiences varied widely and included physically aggressive forms of discrimination (e.g. extreme violence), having a headscarf pulled off by a fellow passenger on public transport or having bricks thrown across the street. There were also experiences of name-calling, taunting, or individuals being made the subject of jokes and “banter” in public. Our participants also referred to experiences of racism online such as on social media. Young people felt it is important to talk about racism and referred to racist incidences on the basis of accent, skin colour, faith, dress, nationality and ethnicity. Young people explained that racist incidents tended to be triggered by media stereotypes and people who were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. Our participants understood that racism can be both covert and overt. Encountering and responding to racism was context-dependent, based on the intersection of place, community size, peer and intergenerational relations, and personal identities.

9.3 Islamophobia - Interconnected with racism, many of our participants felt discriminated against because of their perceived religion and so experienced personal and institutional forms of Islamophobia (as people often assumed they were Muslim). That being said, young Muslims questioned the usefulness of the term ‘Islamophobia’. The term is seen to be ‘othering’, reinforcing difference, which in turn further marginalises Muslims. Young people preferred the term ‘racism’ to ‘Islamophobia’. The media, including social media, are catalysts of anti-Muslim sentiment. We have written about Islamophobia based on this research: https://theconversation.com/eight-ways-that-islamophobia-operates-in-everyday-life-64444.

More recently – and since this research has been completed – we are concerned about the high Levels of public Islamophobia and rise in hate crimes particularly connected with Brexit.

9.4 Legacies of negative media representation - Even although some media outlets may be making an effort to change how they represent Britain’s Asian communities, there is a legacy of
exclusionary headlines and problematic images about British Asians that continually re-circulate; these are very damaging for ethnic minority youth.

9.5 Gendered and racialised stereotypes - a strong theme across our project is about the problematic stereotypes placed upon many ethnic minority young people, including the ways in which these are gendered, racialized and shaped by other markers of social difference. These powerful stereotypes operate to keep ethnic minority young people in their place and may restrict them for engaging in public life. Such stereotypes present a significant set of barriers for young people.

9.6 - Fear of being misrecognised as 'radical', 'extreme' or 'oppressed' - an important barrier to participation in public life that we found in our research was a reluctance amongst some young people to engage in politics in case of misrecognition. Here, young Muslims – and those who were mistaken for being Muslim - were concerned about being labelled as too ‘political’ or as ‘radical’; this led some young people to avoid talking about politics entirely.

9.7 - Lack of awareness of the heterogeneity/diversity of Asian community in UK - all of our participants were concerned (and some were angry) about the lack of awareness of the diversity within the Asian community in the UK. They felt labelled, misunderstood and misrepresented as they were regularly assumed to belong to a homogenous Asian community that lacked any internal diversity. Young people were eager to correct this and to point our divergences, differences and disjunctures within the Asian community (and within sub-groups of this community) whether this be based on politics, faith, family or education.

9.8 The importance of locality and the significance of place in shaping engagement - the focus of our research is upon Scotland and young people from a range of locations across urban, suburban and rural Scotland participated in the research. We found that the local context in which young people grow up often has a strong influence over the likelihood or not of them participating in public life. Some participants were frustrated by assumptions that Scotland is ‘white’ and is not home to a significant Asian community.

9.9 Religious vis-à-vis ethnic and racial classifications - in some contexts, the classification or division of communities by religion and/or race and ethnicity is not particularly helpful and may construct barriers to participation in public life. We found that many young Muslims and other ethnic and religious minority young people were discriminated against because they ‘look Muslim’. With such an example, it would be more useful to engage with such issues through working with a diversity of ethnic and religious minority groups rather than only focusing on one specific religious group. Also, in some places, the Muslim community is small and it may be more helpful to identify barriers to participation based on being a South Asian or based on being BME.

The team who did the research

Peter Hopkins is a Professor of Social Geography at Newcastle University and has conducted research about Muslims in Scotland for over fifteen years. He has a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. His books include ‘Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging’, ‘Muslims in Britain: race, place and identities’ and ‘The Issue of Masculine Identities for British Muslim Identities after 9/11: A Social Analysis’. He recently led a large AHRC-funded research project about the everyday geopolitics of Muslim and non-Muslim young people with the others involved in this submission.
Dr Katherine Botterill is a Lecturer in Human Geography in the School of Life, Sport and Social Sciences at Edinburgh Napier University. She has research expertise about migration, mobilities and geopolitics, and was a full-time researcher on the everyday geopolitics research project.

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

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