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Report

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# Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre, Grenfell, and mosques in Britain today

Amy Plender





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# Foreword

**Anyone from a religious community in Britain today will be familiar with the sense that the picture of their community they see and hear in the media does not always entirely and fully reflect their personal experience of it.**

The Church of England is utterly preoccupied with issues of human sexuality (and not in a good way), until you spend some time with Church of England churches and discover that it isn't. The Roman Catholic Church is populated entirely by paedophile priests, until you look at the scale and nature of the Roman Catholic community and of that scandal, and you realise it isn't.

For no religious community is this more of an issue than Muslims in Britain. The misunderstandings start early. When asked what proportion of people in the country are Muslim, people in the UK guess 15 per cent. The answer is less than 5 per cent. (In all fairness, the UK comes off reasonably well here: in the US it is 17 per cent, compared to the true figure of 1 per cent; in France it was 31 per cent vs. 7.5 percent).<sup>1</sup>

If we get the current proportion wrong, we get the predicted future one 'wronger'. When asked, in 2016, what proportion of the country's population would be Muslim in four years' time, people in Britain said 22 per cent (the official prediction is 6.1 per cent). Again, France topped the polls: an astonishing 40 per cent vs. 8.3 per cent.

The latter fact is not an example of *mere* misperception. It is a measure of perceived Islamification – how fast people believe their society is becoming Muslim. Indeed, it's not too much of an exaggeration to read it as a measure of cultural anxiety.



There will be many reasons for this particular misperception; we should remember that there are plenty of other issues on which the public is (even more) wrong. However, the level and nature of media coverage of Muslims in Britain is undoubtedly one of them. Coverage of Islamic affairs encourages the general public to exaggerate the size and growth of the Muslim community in Britain. But its effect is worse than that.

In 2012, Chis Allen, from the University of Birmingham, published a study entitled *Muslims and the Media*. This offered “a review of the evidence relating to the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British media” and was submitted to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Islamophobia.<sup>2</sup> The findings were sobering. The role and impact of the media reporting of Islam in the UK was, they concluded, “contentious and debatable”. It was also highly influential: over three-quarters (74 per cent) of the British public claimed that they know ‘nothing or next to nothing about Islam’, whilst nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) said that what they do know is ‘acquired through the media’. This media coverage had increased hugely over recent years, and certainly not for the better.

Quoting earlier research, Allen reported that the vast majority (91 per cent) of that news coverage was negative, and an astonishing 84 per cent was judged either as ‘likely to cause damage or danger’ or as ‘operating in a time of intense difficulty or danger’.<sup>3</sup> Quoting the same paper, Allen reported that such media coverage was “likely to provoke and increase feelings of insecurity, suspicion and anxiety amongst non-Muslims”; “likely to provoke feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims”; “likely to be a major barrier preventing the success of the Government’s

community cohesion policies and programmes”; “unlikely to help diminish levels of hate crime and acts of unlawful discrimination by non-Muslims against Muslims”; and “unlikely to contribute to informed discussion and debate amongst Muslims and non-Muslims about ways of working together to maintain and develop Britain as a multicultural, multi-faith democracy.” All in all, not a happy list.

There is nothing new under the sun. “If it bleeds, it leads.” We would be naïve – indeed wrong – to expect newspapers to avoid running stories about terrorism, grooming, or Islamophobia if and when such things go on, just as it would be to avoid stories of paedophile priests. That is their job.

All this is true, but the danger is that in a quite proper reporting of scandals, a true and accurate view of the life and practices of a religious community is lost altogether. The Islamic presence in Britain is reduced to a grim litany of stories about sharia law, security concerns and creeping Islamification. What actually goes on, in the ordinary day-in day-out community life on the ground, altogether disappears.

In 2017-18, Theos conducted a project into the remarkable work that the local faith groups did in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy, which was published as *After Grenfell*.<sup>4</sup> This was a heartening document, showing how many and different faith groups had ‘stepped up to the plate’ in a moment of crisis and drawn on their community presence, their resources, and, above all, their faith to deliver practical and pastoral help when and where it was most needed.

One of those faith groups was the Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre and, in subsequent conversations with the CEO there, Abdurahman Sayed, we agreed to do a more detailed study looking specifically at Al Manaar’s response

to Grenfell, in the light of wider questions pertaining to the Muslim presence in contemporary public life. What had Al Manaar done – on the night, and after? How had it been able to do it? What had it learned from the experience? And what might other mosques, other faith groups, and indeed wider society learn from it? The result is this report. It draws on some of the existing work done in After Grenfell, and indeed speaks to some of the same interviewees, but is, of course, more focused on the question of the Muslim response to the disaster. Al Manaar generously agreed to fund the project, but beyond alerting us to potential interviewees, had no role in the research, analysis or writing of the report.

Theos is a Christian think tank, and we unapologetically stand on and draw from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ in the work that we do. But part of that entails recognising and celebrating the animating affect that any religious faith can have on individual lives and wider communities. Part of it looks to bring truth into the public debate, wherever it may take that debate. And part of it seeks to rebalance the perception of believers, of whatever religious or indeed secular faith, if they are being unfairly or inaccurately represented.

We hope that this short report gives a window into the activity of one particular (and, we believe, impressive) mosque at one particular (and traumatic) moment. In that regard, there is nothing ‘typical’ about Al Manaar, let alone the Grenfell tragedy. But the story might still help rebalance the wider picture and help us all in Britain understand our differences and life together better.

Nick Spencer  
Senior Fellow

The data here are from in Bobby Duffy's book *The Perils of Perception* (Atlantic Books, 2018)

The report can be downloaded here: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/IASS/news-events/MEDIA-ChrisAllen-APPGEvidence-Oct2012.pdf>

INSTED, *The search for common ground: Muslims, non-Muslims and the UK media* (London: INSTED, 2007)

Amy Plender, *After Grenfell: the faith groups' response* (Theos, 2018)



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**This report in 30 seconds**

**Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre was one of a number of faith groups that responded to the Grenfell Tower disaster on 14 June 2017.**

Its immediate response was to open its doors, provide food, drink and shelter. In the longer term, it has worked with survivors, relatives and the wider community through a number of initiatives, including the Hubb community kitchen, a counselling service, holiday camps, and smaller support groups.

Al Manaar was able to respond in this way because it had an open doors policy, had actively sought building relationships with other faith groups and the wider community in the past, had the post of a CEO who was able to respond and coordinate as necessary, and took an active approach to its media visibility.

Al Manaar's response to Grenfell, and its presence in the local community, is a positive example of a mosque's participation in and contribution to wider social issues, often made in the face of negative news stories, which major on integration, extremism, terrorism, and Islamophobia. In this regard, it offers an example and opportunity, albeit one with challenges around long-term funding and vision, for Islamic participation in a multicultural society.



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# 1. Introduction

The Grenfell Tower fire was, in terms of lives lost, the worst fire in Britain since the Second World War. The complexities of both its causes and after-effects have compounded the trauma, and the waxing and waning of media coverage further confused the issues, as the Grenfell community navigate a path between the public's awareness and concern, and their own need for privacy and healing.

The Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre, along with other local faith and voluntary groups, offered an immediate emergency response to the tragedy, opening its doors and offering shelter and sanctuary to those affected by the fire. Al Manaar Mosque and Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre is an Islamic centre lying in the shadow of the Westway flyover in Westbourne Park, North Kensington, about a mile from Grenfell Tower. It has two facets: at its heart is the mosque, a large prayer hall which holds around 2,000 worshippers for Friday prayers, with a roster of incumbent and visiting imams leading regular prayers and worship. The other half of its identity is the Cultural Heritage Centre, overseen by the CEO and his office, running a programme of events, workshops, and training to enhance social integration and cultural familiarity, for both Muslims and non-Muslims. It had its inception in the early 1990s as part of a national and local government scheme to regenerate deprived areas, when it was felt that a centre with additional cultural education and outreach emphasis, rather than solely being used for worship, would be more effective at uniting and integrating the local community. The local authority, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) has remained a stakeholder, with two councillors stipulated to be present on the board of trustees as a matter of course. It was inaugurated by the Prince of Wales in May 2001.



Al Manaar's response to Grenfell was by no means targeted exclusively at Muslims. Rather, in common with the neighbouring faith and voluntary groups' response, their support was deliberately available to those of all faiths and backgrounds. That noted, given that 20 per cent of the local population is Muslim (compared to 10% in the wider borough, and 12% in London generally<sup>1</sup>), there was a clear need to provide faith-specific facilities and resources (such as prayer space, suitable clothing, or halal food). These needs were especially pressing given the timing of the fire, in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, where Muslims fast during daylight hours and focus on religious study and prayer. Al Manaar has also been running faith-sensitive initiatives and supporting the Grenfell community campaign groups, as part of its longer term response.

Following our report *After Grenfell: The Faith Groups' Response*,<sup>2</sup> one of the first research pieces on the aftermath of Grenfell, Theos was approached by Al Manaar to conduct research into Al Manaar's life and work at the time of and following the Grenfell Tower fire, generating "a credible reference document detailing what has happened at Al Manaar, and what lessons we can learn from it – for the local and national community."

To this end, we interviewed 18 people in a series of in-depth 1-2-1 interviews, each lasting between 30 minutes and two hours.<sup>3</sup> The interviewees ranged from local residents and faith leaders, to healthcare professionals, civil servants, and representatives of national faith charities. They all had direct experience of working with Al Manaar, as well as expertise in their own field. We asked the interviewees about their experience and/or perception of Al Manaar's response during the crisis and afterwards, probing on its strengths and

weaknesses, and exploring what, if anything, this said to them about multicultural society today and the presence of Islamic communities of worship therein. To enable the interviewees to speak freely and openly, all interviews have been anonymised in the report, with the exception of Abdurahman Sayed, the CEO of Al Manaar, who felt that, given his position and the nature of the project, it was appropriate to speak completely on the record on certain issues. A list of interviewees and the full interview guide can be found in Appendix 3.

The report proceeds in the following format. We begin by briefly recounting the events of 14th June 2017, noting the role of local faith and voluntary groups in the relief effort. We then focus on the response of Al Manaar in particular, looking at what it did in the short term, how it was able to do it, as well as exploring their longer term response. We then offer a longer reflection on the role of Al Manaar, and mosques in general, in today's multicultural society, concluding with lessons learnt through its response to Grenfell and since, and the challenges that remain today.

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- 1 <https://www.rbkc.gov.uk/pdf/Notting%20Daledata.pdf>
  - 2 <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2018/06/01/after-grenfell-the-faith-groups-response>
  - 3 Interviewees were selected from a list of key partners supplied by Al Manaar.



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## 2. The Grenfell Fire

The events that led to the Grenfell tragedy are by now well known. At 00.54 on 14th June, Behailu Kebede, who lived in Flat 16 of Grenfell Tower, reported a fire in his property, likely caused by an electrical fault with his fridge freezer.<sup>1</sup> The first fire crews arrived on the scene at 00.59, entering the flat at 01.07. Notwithstanding their efforts, the fire spread 19 floors in about 30 minutes,<sup>2</sup> largely facilitated by the exterior cladding, which seems to have created a “chimney effect” and meant the fire spread at an unprecedented speed and temperature.<sup>3</sup> It should be stated at the outset that this report, like the vast majority of other coverage of the Grenfell fire, in no way seeks to blame the London Fire Brigade (LFB) for not containing the fire sooner, in particular as, in the words of Commissioner Dany Cotton, the “building ... behaved in a way it should never have done.”<sup>4</sup>

The rescue operation saw 65 people evacuated by fire crews, with 180 people making their own way out.<sup>5</sup> Many of these went to impromptu refugee centres set up by local faith and voluntary groups, as well as to the Council’s base set up at the Westway Sports Centre.<sup>6</sup> Residents from some of the surrounding housing blocks also had to be evacuated and rehoused. In the chaos of the rescue operation, there were serious concerns that the death toll would reach hundreds of casualties. In the end, it stood at 72, a lower but still an unprecedentedly and tragically high death toll.

A Public Inquiry was ordered by the Prime Minister on the day after the fire, charged with “examin[ing] the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the fire.”<sup>7</sup> It opened in August 2017, and at the time of writing, was expected to continue until at least mid-2020.

- 1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46363830>; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/04/come-quick-first-999-grenfell-tower-fire-call-released/>
- 2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40301289>
- 3 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/30/grenfell-cladding-was-changed-to-cheaper-version-reports-say>
- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/27/london-fire-brigade-chief-denies-she-should-have-expected-grenfell-dany-cotton>
- 5 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40301289>
- 6 For more on the faith groups' response, see Theos' report *After Grenfell: the Faith Groups' Response*.
- 7 <https://www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/about>



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## 3. The immediate response

### What Al-Manaar did

In common with other local faith groups (see Theos' *After Grenfell*), Al Manaar's first reaction to news of the fire was to open their doors and offer shelter. Although Al Manaar stands a little further from Grenfell Tower than the other faith groups in what is now the Grenfell community, it has a particular role in the Grenfell community given the high proportion of Muslim residents in Grenfell Tower at the time of the fire.

Abdurahman Sayed described Al Manaar's reaction as follows:

*"I was up early to pray fajr [pre-dawn] prayers, and received a text from a staff member saying 'Grenfell Tower is burning, what shall we do?'. I just said to open the doors and be open to anyone who needed help, and to put out a WhatsApp message saying as much, and that just went viral."*

By the early morning there were several dozen people, both volunteers and residents from the Tower and surrounding accommodation blocks who had escaped the fire. The staff and volunteers' first actions were to make food and water available to those who needed it (Al Manaar were catering for between 250-300 people per day to break their fast in the month of Ramadan), and to receive and process donations of cash, food and clothing.

A member of a charity which partnered with Al Manaar following the crisis explained their immediate response in the following terms:

*"What we were initially focused on was immediate accommodation and cash needs... And then that weekend, I believe in the early hours of the Sunday morning, we had a*



*conference call with members of [our charity] and individuals like myself... There were other charities that were represented there, I think, some of the senior leadership of Islamic Relief, Muslim Aid and many, many others, Eden Care, Al Manaar.”*  
(Interview #15)

Our interviewees described the chaos and overwhelm that Al Manaar, as with the whole Grenfell community, had to navigate. As an interviewee from one of the partner organisations put it:

*“it was quite evident that the mosque was doing their best to serve the needs of the local community, but they were very under-resourced at the time. It was clear that they needed support and this is where [we] stepped in [by offering practical support, project managing, and liaising with bereaved families]”.*  
(Interview #12)

Another interviewee from a statutory authority described Al Manaar’s approach to working alongside other organisations in the following terms:

*“Al Manaar made a conscious decision to step up and be the centre of Muslim engagement. Certainly there wasn’t anyone else either asking to step in but Al Manaar was sort of there and they have a good Chief Executive who recognised the importance of order and structure.”* (Interview #10)

This “order and structure” seems to have facilitated communication lines between local and national organisations, particularly in brokering relationships between the Muslim and wider communities.

Our interviews painted a varied picture of the relationships between the local faith groups before the fire. Some had fairly close working relationships, even friendships

between the local faith leaders, usually those whose places of worship are close together. From the majority of faith leaders, however, we heard of relationships which were more tenuous, even non-existent, before Grenfell - and several interviewees noted that closer community relationships were a significant, and positive, feature of their lives after Grenfell.

A member of a non-religious organisation described having developed a network of five local 'anchor' organisations (centres that already had or quickly developed close working relationships, and were in a position to share information and resources, and support each other's rapid response), of which Al Manaar was one, and noted Al Manaar's assistance in approaching local Muslim communities. The interviewee said:

*"we were more comfortable to be involved with the relief effort alongside Al Manaar, as they knew the community. We particularly needed their help with opening communication lines with local Muslims, and were grateful for the help they gave with that."* (Interview #8)

Some interviewees, however, reported communication issues with staff at Al Manaar during the crisis and since. One working partner described difficulties liaising with the imams especially:

*"You couldn't trust whether they would turn up or not. When we were preparing for the vigil, we almost never had the imam there but we knew that the chief exec was behind it and supporting it."* (Interview #10)

The pressure on the CEO to manage the relationships and needs of both those in Al Manaar's core congregation of regular worshippers and service users, and those who first came to Al Manaar for help or to volunteer after Grenfell, occurred

frequently in our interviews, and will be expanded further below.

## How they were able to do it

### Open doors and relationships

Given Al Manaar’s position at some distance from Grenfell Tower, it is significant that it became such a hub for those seeking help as well as volunteers. This seems to have been for two main reasons. First, as one interviewee put it, “people went where they felt they had a relationship.” (Interview #2) This was largely due to the nature of the religious and ethnic population of the Lancaster West Estate, in which Grenfell Tower stands.

Given the cultural and religious needs of any Muslim community, it would be natural for many to go to a Muslim faith centre when in need. All interviewees described faith as being significant to members of the local community. In the words of one, faith is

*“vitaly important. Faith allows you to connect with people, and a good level of cultural understanding, on both sides, helps people relax and open up – without fear of judgement.”*  
(Interview #9)

However, there were also significant numbers of non-Muslim volunteers as well as those seeking help and support. This seems to have been due to local residents having a pre-existing knowledge of the life and work of Al Manaar, rather than discovering it during the crisis. Al Manaar’s “open doors policy” (Interview #7) did not emerge overnight – nor would it have been effective, let alone have integrity, had it done so. Rather, its history of holding events (e.g., anti-extremism seminars, faith-sensitive relationship coaching, and lectures

including a history of the Israel-Palestine conflict given by a former diplomat), participating in the Visit My Mosque scheme, and in serving its local community (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) through initiatives such as exercise classes for the elderly or events tackling knife crime seems to have made a broader range of local residents aware of Al Manaar, enabling them to feel that they could offer something to its relief effort. In the words of one interviewee, a Muslim who usually worships at a mosque closer to their home elsewhere in London:

*“I work in the area around Grenfell, and when the fire happened, I just wanted to link in with the help being offered, [it’s] not about self-gratification but about what’s right. I emailed various local groups I knew of offering my help, and Al Manaar were the only one to respond.”* (Interview #3)

### Visibility and media presence

Along with a policy of open doors and actively building up relationships, a second factor seems to have raised Al Manaar’s profile after Grenfell: its visibility. For instance, some interviewees who had little to no relationship with Al Manaar before the fire became aware of it during the response through seeing branded clothing and vehicles of other Muslim partner organisation around Al Manaar and the disaster zone. As one interviewee put it:

*“I was new to the area and hadn’t got to know the other faith groups yet. The first I became aware of Al Manaar was when I saw Muslim Aid vans going to and from it”.* (Interview #1)

Al Manaar later became part of the Grenfell Muslim Response Unit (GMRU), a group of local and national Muslim organisations who came together to respond to Grenfell. As a representative of a partner charity explained:

*“We decided to work under a sort of unified banner where we could coordinate specific services. So we would have a team looking at immediate cash assistance, a team looking at legal support, a team looking at emotional support or bereavement services, that kind of thing. So for example, Eden Care, one of our partners, they specialise in burials, whereas we’re very much focused on financial wellbeing. As this grew, this is what became the GMRU, or the Grenfell Muslim Response Unit.” (Interview #15)*

As the emergency response continued into weeks, there became a need to formalise these relationships. Accordingly, GMRU became a project of the National Zakat Foundation (the UK’s institution for processing and dispersing the annual charitable payment made by Muslims as part of their religious observance), and supported by other charities including Muslim Aid, Islamic Relief and the Aziz Foundation. GMRU has gone on to work with a number of delivery partners such as Eden Care, Grenfell Legal Support, the Ramadan Tent Project, in addition to Al Manaar.

Additionally, and in common with other local faith leaders, the CEO appeared with other faith leaders in media interviews throughout the relief effort and since. This had two main results. First, and most importantly, it provided information about the immediate impact of the fire and raised the profile of the Grenfell community through the media coverage. Second, it served to develop relationships with other local faith and voluntary groups, as they met beside the news cameras and across police cordons during the relief effort. As one local faith leader said:

*“I knew of Al Manaar before the fire through my work in the voluntary sector, but not that well. I got to know them more because on the morning of the fire, my husband appeared with*

*the CEO and some other faith leaders on the news, talking about what was happening, so we met there and it went from there.”*  
(Interview #2)

Much has been written about the faith groups of North Kensington coming together in the aftermath of Grenfell, which was reflected in our interviews for this piece. The details of these meetings are often swept up in the narrative of integration and inclusion but there were often more practical reasons the faith groups first meeting, such as *iftars*, prayer groups, and vigils. Whilst sometimes relationships developed out of an abstract desire to create more cohesive communities, or expand theological understanding, we heard that relationships more often emerged through necessity than theory – and that they were all the closer for it.



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## 4. Longer term response

In the longer term, Al Manaar's work with the Grenfell community has included the **Hubb community kitchen**, the **counselling service**, holiday camps, and smaller support groups, as well as support for the broader community-wide initiatives, such as the monthly Silent Walks and survivors' groups.

The **Hubb kitchen** began as early as July 2017, when survivors of the fire, who had been re-housed in hotels, asked Al Manaar if they could use their catering facilities to cook their own food. To begin with, the kitchen was open twice a week, though demand gradually grew as it began to be used for children's birthday parties and other gatherings. As one interviewee described it, "it's become a therapy centre of its own, not just a place of cooking and eating – a place of recovery." (Interview #16)

The kitchen came to the attention of the Duchess of Sussex, who suggested creating a cook book from the recipes used by the women in the kitchen. *Together: Our community cook book* was released in September 2018, and to date has raised well over £500,000 pounds<sup>1</sup> to support the development of the kitchen. Following this, Al Manaar is able to keep the kitchen open seven days a week rather than two, and "aims to keep expanding our work," (Interview #16) in, for instance, talks with the NHS and local colleges in running healthy eating and nutrition workshops, as well as cookery classes.

The need for a **counselling service** became apparent in the late summer of 2017, when some parents at Al Manaar began reporting that their children were demonstrating symptoms of being at risk of suicide, and asked for help to support them through a process of recovery. (Interview #14) In addition to



this, an interviewee described that following the immediate aftermath of the fire:

*“the long-term recovery and emotional trauma that these families and communities were having to deal with really required a faith sensitive approach. A lot of key workers were not able to support these families. And oftentimes we received messages or emails saying that the key workers that have been provided were not in touch with them or did not know where to find this faith based service that the family needs from burial rites to counselling services which is appropriate to these families of Muslim faith.”* (Interview #12)

As a result of this, this interviewee and their organisation identified “a massive gap in the existence of faith- and culturally-sensitive counselling to these families,” in particular, residents’ ability to seek help and civic bodies’ ability to meet complex needs, not just post-Grenfell, but with the added complexity of pre-existing issues too. Accordingly, the fact that Al Manaar could offer the services of a multi-lingual counsellor became crucial in this organisation agreeing to partner in the provision of a counselling service, “because we realised that the community was so diverse, so we needed someone who could work in different languages.” (Interview #12)

From this, the service has grown from an early programme of parenting skills workshops to two accredited counsellors seeing dozens of therapy clients a week in four languages, alongside running specific support groups.

Our interviewees told us that Al Manaar faced significant cultural challenges in developing its mental health support. One interviewee described how:

*“I think mental health issues within the Muslim community are a taboo topic because a lot of people point to issues of mental health, like depression and anxiety, to a lack of or weakness of faith. That doesn’t correlate with what Islam actually teaches because as the counselling workshops and services demonstrate, there are many profound lessons where the Prophet Mohammed himself lost his wife and his uncle in the same year. That was known as the Year of Grief and Sorrow for him because he lost the two most beloved people to him at a very difficult time in his teachings of Islam. He didn’t just rely on the Qur’an, or God’s teachings. He had a network of support around him, such as his friends and companions.” (Interview #12)*

This interviewee described how a stigma around mental illness remains in certain Muslim communities, where mentally ill people might be referred to as “lunatics,” (Interview #12) or, as another person put it, “they might be called mad, crazy, not normal.” (Interview #9) Nonetheless, we heard that the counselling service can be seen to represent a significant step of agency and taking healthy control of one’s circumstances:

*“You still need to tie your camel before you pray to God – you still need to do something before you can rely on just your prayers. The Prophet Mohammed said to tie your camel and then place your faith in God. I think that’s a really important aspect that this counselling service is teaching. It’s teaching the community that faith does not teach you to just stay at home and to have a defeatist mentality.” (Interview #12)*

This interviewee argued that a faith-sensitive approach to counselling allows clients both to “seek solace from faith but also to take active steps to improve our mental health and our situation so that we can be better citizens and believers who can worship God.”

To this end, the counselling and pastoral support team also run broader **support groups**, which include art therapy, massage therapy from accredited practitioners, fitness groups (including exercise classes for the elderly), relationship workshops, parenting support groups, and trauma and mental health workshops. Our interviewees often spoke about how these groups were “healing for the body and soul,” (Interview #16) and aim to balance being open to all whilst being culturally appropriate for the Muslim community in particular.

In the case of massage therapy for instance, this includes, but is not limited to, offering clothed massage, participants being able to request a therapist of their own gender, if they prefer, and especially, emphasising the mental health benefits of massage. As one interviewee said, “I haven’t had much massage before, but being able to just come here and receive some has been really helpful. It’s very relaxing, and has been really good for my mental health and in reducing my stress levels.” (Interview #16) However, as we note further below, the viability of this service is now in question due to funding constraints.

**Faith sensitive holiday camps** for local children affected by the fire were first run in the Christmas holidays of 2017, in partnership with West London Synagogue, with camps running in each of the holidays of the subsequent school years. The primary aim of these groups is to provide a safe space for children to play and learn, and especially to process their feelings following the fire and its aftermath through tools such as art therapy and guided play. One interviewee described it as:

*“meaningful interfaith work in action...it’s not an arbitrary interfaith dinner. There’s no agenda, just people coming together*

*who want these kids who've had a horrible time, to have a good time.” (Interview #7)*

Whilst the primary aim of the camps is the pastoral care of children affected by Grenfell, as well as giving their parents and carers some respite, our interviewees told us they had a significant cultural impact:

*“the art therapy, in particular, has really shown the children and their parents the healing and therapeutic value of creative things. In first or second generation immigrants there is often an emphasis on children’s future professions, and art is seen as too vague and unfamiliar... By just working with art materials, the youngsters are teaching the older ones how to be comfortable with being British and Muslim.” (Interview #5)*


It also provides an opportunity for children to mix with others they might not have met, and have a positive effect on any unconscious prejudice – as our interviewee put it, “it’s really good for our Muslim kids to recognise Jewish kids as caring, as caregivers – it challenges any internalised anti-Semitism and cultural misinformation.” (Interview #5)

Moreover, we also heard, as mentioned above, how practical interfaith work can be encouraging to the participants’ faith. Our interviewee said, “working in a meaningful close way with people of other faiths strengthens my own faith,” in particular citing “learning from an ancient tradition how to balance religious and cultural identity with being in modern, secular society.” (Interview #5)

**Broader community support** includes joining the wider Grenfell community on initiatives such as the Silent March on the fourteenth of every month, and the Grenfell Memorial Mosaic, in collaboration with ACAA (Association for Cultural

Advancement through Visual Art). We were told that the Mosaic aims to “visually embody the spirit of the outpouring of love for the Grenfell community after the fire, and represent all the volunteers who helped”, through the participation of twelve local groups in creating the artwork. (Interview #5) Whilst the creation and unveiling of the Mosaic was widely seen as a positive and cathartic process, we also heard of certain tensions and ‘politicisations’ around that and the Silent Walk. These tended to be around the involvement of certain splinter groups of national parties who did not have any particular link to North Kensington before Grenfell. In addition to this, our interviewees often referred to the media narrative of tensions between the local authority and local residents. Whilst the Silent Walk was seen almost exclusively as positive, several of our interviewees felt it was important not to gloss over the rare but significant difficulties within it, and not assume that the popular media narrative of a smooth-running initiative is the complete picture. For our interviewees, the reality is far more complex than tweets and press photos allow for.

- 1 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jun/09/hidden-mental-health-legacy-grenfell-disaster>
- 2 <https://www.acava.org/news/remembering-grenfell-tower>



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## 5. The role of Al Manaar and other mosques in a multicultural society

There are no easy answers to a crisis like Grenfell. The insights which Al Manaar has gained, as with neighbouring faith and voluntary groups, are hard won, and evolving as we move further away from the initial crisis. However, there are certain lessons we heard of which Al Manaar's partners believed could be applied by mosques and other faith groups, regardless of their specific circumstances. These included employing a CEO to oversee a faith centre's working and pastoral relationships, having coherent strategies for media engagement, and a practical, dynamic, and relational approach to interfaith work.

## CEO

To begin with, the majority of interviewees cited the role of a CEO at Al Manaar as being key to its engagement strategy. We were told that having a CEO is unusual for a mosque if it acts exclusively as a place of worship, but is to be expected for an Islamic centre running outreach and educational events. As one interviewee put it:

*“in having a CEO, Al Manaar have an in-house outreach engagement officer; they've got someone who is able to build relationships with people and groups outside Al Manaar's usual community, while the imams can get on with their preaching and spiritual leadership.”* (Interview #1)

As well as facilitating the imams' theological study and pastoral work, a CEO enables a faith centre to be more outward looking and engaged with its neighbours as well as with comparable centres across the country. It was felt by the majority of our interviewees that Al Manaar has become “an outstanding example of Muslim community engagement – a really good model of how things can be in terms of addressing



social issues and interfaith friendship. The position of CEO is key to making capacity for that.” (Interview #6)

This can also mean there is a **point person for media enquiries** should there be a particular need, which in Al Manaar’s case has been particularly around Grenfell, the launch of the Hubb community kitchen, and the allegations of extremism. Where there are funds and capacity, the people we spoke to believed that a CEO, or at least a designated Engagement Officer, can be an invaluable member of a faith group’s leadership team.

### Interfaith and community work

Tied to this, our interviewees cited Al Manaar’s approach to **interfaith work**, in particular its ability to build relationships across religious and cultural divides, particularly important given the diversity of North Kensington.

As a result, all local faith and voluntary groups have had to become skilled at working with other communities and a variety of demographics, especially, but not exclusively, following Grenfell. Even before the fire, in May 2017, Al Manaar partnered with West London Synagogue to hold an interfaith *iftar*. Along with the pastoral and psychological support, however, initiatives such as these “[bring] kids together who would be from communities where they normally wouldn’t interact,” thus making a tangible difference to social integration across local cultural divides. (Interview #10)

After the *Sunday Telegraph* coverage of the Henry Jackson Society report in November 2018, saying that the mosque has been “linked... to individuals connected to ‘terrorist acts’” and “run by an imam who says girls who listen to music risk becoming strippers”,<sup>1</sup> West London Synagogue issued a

statement of solidarity and support of Al Manaar, saying that it had been proud to partner with Al Manaar on a variety of initiatives, including the response to the Grenfell Tower fire and the Winter Night Shelter supporting rough sleepers, and that, in their opinion, Al Manaar had made “an unequivocal stand against extremism and terrorism”.<sup>2</sup>

One particular outcome of interfaith work, as well as the relationship building it offers, is the **strengthening** it offers to those of either faith. The majority of people we spoke to, of both Muslim and other faiths, argued that whilst some members of their own faith groups were squeamish about collaborating with or even debating those of other faiths, lest their faith be seen to be weaker in some way, in our interviewees’ experience the opposite had been true. We heard people from various faith perspectives echoing our interviewee who said:

*“people think that by talking to Muslims, hanging out with them, finding commonalities, somehow my Christian faith must be watered down or weaker in some way. In fact, the opposite is true. It strengthens my own faith to have to clarify it to someone who believes something different, whilst at the same time allowing me to see the beauty of their own experience.”*  
(Interview #1)

In this light, far from diluting or syncretising the participants’ faiths, for our interviewees, interfaith work had been a spiritually-encouraging, theologically-rigorous exercise. It had actively enhanced their faith and appreciation of their own tradition (as well as increasing their understanding of the other), rather than weakening it.

Within the Grenfell community in particular, we heard that these new relationships had been especially helpful

for **faith leaders' peer support**, as they in turn support their congregations. The faith leaders we spoke to were honest about the toll the aftermath of Grenfell had taken on their physical and mental health:

*“Our interfaith leaders’ forum has become really helpful, and Al Manaar is a central part of that. Other faith leaders understand what I’m going through, sometimes more than my own congregation does, and we can support each other.”*  
(Interview #1)

### **Al Manaar’s role in a multicultural society**

Muslim communities in Britain today are in a unique situation compared to the rest of the country. Concerns around integration, extremism, racism, grooming, the Prevent duty, and Islamophobia, to name a few, are pressing issues in the lives of many British Muslims. In this context, mosques and Islamic faith centres of all sizes have a crucial role to play in educating and supporting both Muslims and non-Muslims as they seek to live together in a way that neither ignores nor problematizes their differences. Organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain aim to reach out to and represent as broad a range of Muslims as possible, though this is naturally a challenging task. The onus is on each individual mosque and centre to discern their role for their own context, particularly with supporting their community to navigate the path of being both Muslim and British; holding those identities as compatible, rather than in competition.

Our interviewees told us that their experience of working with Al Manaar taught them that, though this might be difficult, “it is possible”. (Interview #3) In the words of one interviewee:

*“I think that the places of faith like Al Manaar demonstrate the beautiful teachings of Islam which is built on social cohesion and social diversity and bringing communities together. We saw that throughout Ramadan, throughout the aftermath of the Grenfell fire, when people from every walk of life were coming to the doors of that mosque and the community were stepping up to help each other.” (Interview #12)*

As with other faith groups, the sense among both volunteers and service users we spoke to was that the response to Grenfell somehow symbolised a larger story of human nature and the “unity of human values,” (Interview #10) and of society working at its best.

It was hoped that Al Manaar could act as a “beacon” (Interview #12) for other mosques and Islamic centres (significantly, ‘Al Manaar’ translates as ‘The Lighthouse’), and that other Islamic and faith groups could learn from them as a centre that:

*“provides all sorts of services that are needed by the community, and in working with other communities [to show] that British Muslims don’t just work in isolation. We want to work for the greater good and that’s what this mosque has been able to achieve through responding to the needs of its community.” (Interview #14)*

Other interviewees, particularly those outside the Muslim faith, noted how their work with Al Manaar had challenged any negative presuppositions they might have had around Muslims and Islam as a faith. One particular marker of this was the response to the Christchurch attacks in March 2019. In common with many Muslim and Kiwi centres across Britain, Al Manaar held a prayer service and opened a book of condolences for both of the mosques who suffered the attacks.

The majority of our non-Muslim interviewees referred to their participation in this response, such as visiting Al Manaar to offer their solidarity and to sign the condolences book, as symbolising a progression towards greater affinity with their Muslim neighbours, specifically through working alongside Al Manaar after Grenfell. As one local faith leader put it:

*“I was surprised by how affected I felt by the Christchurch attacks. I went to Al Manaar afterwards specifically to offer my condolences and to sign their book. I don’t think I would have done that before Grenfell, it wouldn’t have occurred to me to do so. I think it’s partly that having been through one trauma that it gives me greater empathy for and awareness of others’ traumas, but also because I have friends at Al Manaar now, and I care for them, and want them to know I’m thinking of them.”*

(Interview #2)

### Remaining challenges

As we spoke to our interviewees about their perception of Al Manaar’s life and work, two particular challenges stood out: funding and vision.

There was a staggering response to Grenfell in terms of both physical needs and financial donations. Notwithstanding this, the most common challenge identified by our interviewees was the question of future funding. Whilst Al Manaar, like many of the local groups, received a significant amount of money, this was not an inexhaustible supply. In particular, we were told by several interviewees that the counselling service needs further funding to maintain its proper running. As one interviewee detailed:

*“the demand for the counselling service is just growing, it’s not fading with time. These people need urgent help; they can’t always wait for an NHS referral, and they need someone who*

*literally speaks their language. We need funding for more hours [available for clients], and for the proper clinical supervision of the therapists.” (Interview #14)*

Beyond funding, and looking to the future, there is the issue of vision, with a significant proportion of interviewees keen to see Al Manaar take steps to discern and refine its role in society. As one interviewee put it:

*“they need to discern whether they want to be a national, leading faith centre, or a local centre focussing on their own community. Either is valid, but choosing one will make a difference to how they work... Do they want to be defined by Grenfell or do they want to take Grenfell and move it forward and say, ‘actually, this has shown us the power we can achieve and this is what we want to do going forward’? Because I think that still needs to be finalised.” (Interview #10)*

There seemed to be a positive response to this kind of approach, as other interviewees felt that Al Manaar’s increased profile following its work in the Grenfell community could lead to it becoming “a national mosque.” (Interview #11) However, it was acknowledged that such a position, whilst likely a positive thing, would bring with it financial, personal, and in particular staffing pressures, meaning that significant additional support would be needed. One interviewee expressed this in the following terms:

*“Al Manaar is amazingly proactive and enterprising with the events and programmes it puts on - though with the amount they do, they are understaffed: there is a lot of pressure on the CEO. I don’t think that’s sustainable long-term - if they want to maintain that level of work, I think they’d really need more support.” (Interview #6)*

The challenge, according to our interviewees, lies both in discerning the vision for Al Manaar's future, as well as being able to back this up with practical resources.

- 1 <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/media-centre/mosqueduchess-of-sussex-visited-linked-to-terror-suspects/>; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/23/meghan-cookbook-mosque-linked-19-terror-suspects-including-jihadi/>
- 2 <https://almanaar.org.uk/west-london-synagogues-solidarity-statement/>





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## 6. Conclusion

**Coverage of Islam in the UK is usually dominated by stories of extremism and terrorism on the one hand, and Islamophobia and hate crimes on the other. As members of other religious faiths will testify – albeit for rather different reasons – this tends to pass over the vast majority of the ordinary, faithful life and work that Muslims make to British life.**

Research into this is, at this stage, very thin. There is evidence concerning the comparably high levels of Muslim charitable giving. A 2013 ICM poll found that Muslims donated an average of almost £371 each to charity, compared with Jews (£270), Protestants (£202), Catholics (£178) and atheists (£116). However, the level of research into the community participation and contribution of the UK's c. 2,000 mosques is very low. There is anecdotal evidence of mosques hosting English classes, employment workshops, exercise groups, food banks, eating facilities, and the like, but as yet – to the best of our knowledge – no substantial quantitative or qualitative research into such activities. Our hope is that this report helps to begin to rectify that.

The Grenfell tragedy was an exceptional event and it may be that the faith groups that responded to it were exceptional institutions. But most representatives of those groups we spoke to for this report and for the earlier Theos report *After Grenfell* would deny that they were exceptional.

In either case, their experience does have lessons for other groups, as Al Manaar shows. It played a full and vital role in the response to the tragedy, both for local Muslims and the wider community, in the immediate and longer terms.

It was able to do so partly because it had long pursued an open doors policy to the wider community, because it had actively sought to build relationships with other faith groups

and with what came to be known as the Grenfell community; because it had the post of a CEO, the current holder of which was able to respond positively and professionally to the tragedy, and coordinate Al Manaar's response; and because it adopted took an active approach to its media engagement.

It is unlikely that any of these factors will be directly imitable in other circumstances, and everyone hopes and prays that there will never again be the need to respond to a tragedy like Grenfell, but the experience of Al Manaar does offer a valuable example for and helpful pointers to other mosques in the UK, as they seek to live out their faith in a plural, and sometimes hostile, society.




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## Appendix 1: List of interviewees

The following is a list of people interviewed for this project, listed in alphabetical order, with no relation to the numbering of interviews above. In addition to this list, a further interviewee from the Ministry Of Housing, Communities and Local Government participated but requested to be left anonymous.

- Abdurahman Sayed, Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre, CEO
- Abu Mumin, Eden Care, Social Worker
- Alan Everett, All Hallows West Dulwich, Priest (formerly St. Clement and St. James)
- Amina Thomson, The Light Within Healing & Development Centre, Psychotherapist
- Amnah Khan, The Ogden Trust, Programme Officer
- Harris Iqbal, Penny Appeal, Director of Global Programmes
- Ismahan Egal, Al Manaar, Lead Art Therapy Coordinator
- Jackie Blanchflower, Latymer Community Church, Church Leader
- Lotifa Begum, Muslim Aid, Advocacy Co-ordinator
- Mark Simms, Rugby Portobello Trust, CEO
- Mike Long, Notting Hill Methodist Church, Minister
- Mohamed Omer, Gardens of Peace Muslim Cemetery, Board Member - External Affairs
- Mohammed Adel Chowdhury, Grenfell Muslim Response Unit

- Nacera Solarbi, Al Manaar, Psychotherapeutic Counsellor
- Nic Schlagman, West London Synagogue, Head of Social Action and Interfaith
- Susan Dolton, Kensington & Chelsea Foundation, Director



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## Appendix 2: Interview guide

The following questions formed the basis of the interview guide for this project. This being an in-depth qualitative study, however, and with varying length of interview, the guide was modified and expanded depending on the interview.

Opening questions: occupation, length of time living in/ around Grenfell, involvement with Al Manaar.

*Short term response*

What was your perception and experience of the Al Manaar's emergency response?

How did you hear of what they were doing?

*Medium term: 48 hrs-1 month.*

What has been your perception and experience of Al Manaar's medium term response? E.g., what has been done in campaigning and ongoing practical, emotional, and spiritual support?

How has this been received? And why?

What has worked/ not worked?

*Long term: 1 month-year-on going*

What has been your perception and experience of the long term response?

Strengths and weaknesses?

What can we learn from it?

What new relationships have developed and lasted? How has it changed the style of those relationships?



How has it changed or confirmed your opinion of local faith groups, including your own?

What does this tell you about a multicultural society?



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## Appendix 3: Further reading on Grenfell

**A number of publications have reflected on the Grenfell fire and the lesson that faith groups, and others, might learn from them. These include:**

Alan Everett, *After the fire: finding words for Grenfell*  
(Canterbury Press)

Amy Plender, *After Grenfell: the faith groups' response* (Theos)

Diocese of London, *The Social Legacy of Grenfell: an agenda for change* (Resurgo)

Gaby Doherty, *Grenfell Hope: Stories from the community*  
(SPCK)

Muslim Aid, *Mind The Gap - A review of the voluntary sector response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy* (Muslim Aid)



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**Doing Good: A Future  
for Christianity in  
the 21st Century**

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## Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre and the response to Grenfell

Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre was one of a number of faith groups that responded to the Grenfell Tower disaster on 14 June 2017. It responded immediately to open its doors, provide food, drink and shelter. In the longer term, it has worked with survivors, relatives and the wider community through a number of initiatives, including the Hubb community kitchen, counselling, and holiday camps. How was this made possible? And what does Al Manaar's life and work tell us about the role of mosques and faith groups in a multicultural society? This report examines the motivations and results of a faith centre rooted in its local community, and what lessons it holds for us all.



**Amy Plender** is a researcher at Theos, and the author of **After Grenfell: The Faith Groups' Response**. Research interests include theological responses to suffering and mental health, theology and the arts, liturgical practice, and interfaith dialogue

Cover photograph: Grenfell Memorial Community Mosaic, June 2019.  
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