Project Plan

**Among the last ones to leave? Understanding the Journeys of Muslim Children in the Care System in the Midlands**

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**Project summary:** Children need permanent and secure homes, and recent government policy has tried to expedite the process through which permanent homes are found for children who cannot be looked after by their biological parents. According to research evidence, Muslim children experience significant delay in finding a permanent home. Where the child has complex needs due to disability, age, being part of a sibling group or being of dual heritage, finding permanent placement takes even longer. This research project will analyse the social, cultural and religious reasons for the small number of Muslim parents coming forward to adopt or foster will be interrogated. It will interrogate the barriers that prospective parents face when considering adopting or fostering a child. Through interviews with social workers, adoptive parents and prospective adoptive parents this research will present a research-informed narrative of the complexities in Muslim children’s circumstance and identities, which influence how decisions are made about their lives. By better understanding the journeys of these children through the care system, this research will provide an evidence base for practitioners, policy makers and communities to draw upon, and in doing so will improve outcomes for these children, their families and in the long run, for society as a whole.

**Proposed start date of grant:** 1/12/2016 **Proposed end date of grant**: 30/11/2017

**Aim:** To improve outcomes for Muslim children in the care system in the Midlands, by specifically understanding their journeys and the contexts in which they occur, in order to inform policy and practice.

**Background:** Children of Muslim heritage are likely to experience very significant delay in arranging a permanent fostering or adoptive placement. Where a child has complex needs due to disability, age, dual heritage or being part of a sibling group, finding permanent placement takes even longer. In some cases they may never find a permanent home at all. Such delays cause lasting harm for children. According to Selwyn, ‘delay in decision making and action has an unacceptable price in terms of the reduction in children’s life chances and the financial costs to local authorities, the emotional and financial burden later placed on adoptive families and future costs to society’. This research project will reduce delays in British Muslim children’s journeys by producing an evidence base to guide policy and practice, and by raising community awareness of these children’s needs. The research will consider the following interrelated issues:

1. Muslim heritage children currently constitute a small proportion of the children in the care system. Changing population demographics in some, mostly urban, British and Welsh local authority areas mean that these numbers will increase.
2. In British Muslim communities, there is limited recognition of the fact that there are vulnerable children in the community who need permanent homes. Anecdotal evidence suggests a perception within Muslim communities that conditions leading to children being placed in care - such as maltreatment of children or family dysfunction - do not exist in their communities. Adoption and fostering (and the indirectly linked issue of fertility) remain taboo subjects that are not openly discussed. They are also cultural and religious barriers to adoption as a result of religious misinterpretation. As a result not enough prospective adoptive parents are coming forward from Muslim communities.
3. While legislation no longer requires social workers to find ‘perfect matches’, discussions with social workers suggest that the realities of practice on the ground generate two sets of issues: (a) a view-point that a good ethnic match between adoptive parents and children, including physical resemblance, can enable adoptive families to more easily settle down into a family unit, reducing issues around attachment and identity formation & (b) indication that prospective adoptive parents may stipulate that they would only consider a child whose ethnicity matches with their own. So although there is now no legal emphasis on ‘matching’, it is unclear whether this has translated into everyday practice. So despite the new legislation, children still wait.
4. Finally, through discussions with social workers, it has become apparent that for some Muslim children other forms of permanency such as kinship care, special guardianship or long-term fostering may be more suitable or practical.

**Research Questions:** This research project will answer the following questions

1. Who are the British Muslim children in the care system, why are they there and how long are they there for?
2. What social, cultural and religious factors within British Muslim communities influence the finding of permanent families for Muslim heritage children?
3. What social, cultural and religious barriers within British Muslim communities that limit the number of prospective adoptive parents applying to adopt and how can these be removed?
4. What factors influence practitioners in the finding of permanent families for Muslim heritage children?
5. How and why are routes to permanency other than adoption, such as kin-ship care, long-term foster care and special guardianship influential in the journeys of these children?

**Methodology:** This project will take an ethnographic approach that positions people – in this case, service providers, social workers, adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents, policy makers, legal practitioners, foster carers and families – as the makers of meaning and holders of knowledge. Participatory methodologies are central to this project and throughout its duration, this project will draw on the expertise of people already working in this area, to provide a research based evidence-pool to inform policy and practice. This consultative process has already begun.

This research proposal has been developed in consultation with the Coram-BAAF Black Minority Ethnic Perspectives Advisory Committee (BMEPAC). BMEPAC is an inter-professional group of experienced Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage practitioners (BME) and representatives from BME communities. It promotes wider understanding of the particular needs of BME children within adoption and fostering. It provides a nationally-significant forum for identifying issues, formulating agendas, and commenting on policy and practice issues. BMEPAC has agreed to continue as an advisory cum steering group for this project. The research project has also consulted with social workers in two local authorities (LAs), who reflecting on the issues that they have come across in their practice, suggested modifications to this proposal including examining (i) diverse aspects of children’s identities and how these influence the family-finding process (ii) the decision making process for prospective parents – how do prospective Muslim parents decide to adopt and (iii) routes to permanency other than adoption. This project will work closely with colleagues from Penny Appeal and will use both quantitative and qualitative methods in two phases:

Phase 1: Gathering statistical data from all LAs in the Midlands; freedom of information requests (FoIs) may be used to facilitate data collection. Data to be collected will include:

1. Number of Muslim heritage children in Local Authority care over the last five years, ages of children and any complex needs. Where data about religion is not recorded we will use data about ethnicity to approximately deduce data about religion
2. Trends in the statistical data will be correlated with qualitative evidence and socio-political contexts including for example the arrival of refugee children
3. Average time taken to place Muslim children in permanent care, as compared to children of other backgrounds
4. No. of prospective parents coming forward from Muslim heritage backgrounds
5. Who are Muslim children being placed with and why?

Phase 2: In-depth case study work with the three adoption consortiums in the Midlands: Adopt West Mids, Adoption in the East Midlands and Adoption In The Black Country Birmingham & Telford or which at least 5 LA’s in the Midlands area (the final decision on this will be taken based on advice from Tay Jiva as to how we are defining ‘the Midlands’ and also the environment with regards to working as consortiums at the time of beginning ethnographic work). This in-depth case study work will involve the following methods

1. In-depth interviews with Social workers, adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents to develop understanding of the barriers to adoptions and ways to overcome these barriers including:
   * thirty surveys with members of the Muslim community in the Midlands to identify barriers to adoption;
   * two focus groups (8-10 attendees at each) with members of the Muslim community in the Midlands to identify barriers to adoption;
   * interviews with 5 Muslim approved adopters in the Midlands to identify gaps in service provision for approved adopters;
2. Dissemination events in each of the LA areas on the project findings aimed at increasing awareness of adoption and fostering within Muslim communities. These events will be run in close collaboration with of Penny Appeal

**Access:** Case study work in phase 2 will be undertaken in partnership with LAs / Consortiums who will provide access to social workers and parents. For the attitudinal survey, snowball sampling techniques will be used. Case study will be chosen with a view to getting a national spread and that diverse issues are covered. The finding from the FoI request will be used to select case studies

**Ethics:** The research will be conducted after approval by Coventry University Ethics Committee and will adhere to the highest ethical standards on quality, integrity, impartiality, independence, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and avoiding harm.

**Impact Summary:** The Prime Minister on 28th Oct 2015 when announcing a review of care homes in the UK said that, ‘The most important thing we can do is to speed up the adoption system so that more children get adopted’. Muslim children are among those who wait the longest and the main impact of this project will be to improve outcomes for Muslim children in the care system and reduce delays in finding permanent homes for them. In the short term, through a programme of knowledge exchange and translation with practitioners (including a practitioner guide and associated training programmes), this project will proactively deliver an immediate impact by improving professional practice in caring for Muslim children in the care system, assessing prospective parents for them and arranging permanent placements. Although the project focusses on the Midlands area, it will have an impact nationally through the resources and legacy it produces. After delivering this project we will seek research funding to conduct further research.

In the medium term, knowledge and outputs generated from this project will provide and disseminate an evidence base which will directly increase awareness and understanding within policy-making, practitioner and Muslim communities. As a direct consequence, the needs of children in the care system will be better understood and more appropriately and speedily addressed. In the long term, the lasting influence of this project in improving outcomes for Muslim children will reassure both adoptive and biological parents that the needs of these children are being met efficiently and in the best possible way. This research will contribute empirical evidence to three other related policy and practice discussions. (1) Its findings will provide an informed commentary on the appropriateness or not of ethnic and cultural ‘matching’ as part of the family-finding process. (2) This project’s discussions of the religious considerations, particularly of Islam, will be relevant to children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers who in current socio-political contexts are often of Muslim heritage. (3) Finally this research will contribute to discussions around special guardianship and other forms of permanency.

As discussed in earlier sections, three-way engagement with practitioners, policy makers and Muslim communities at local and national levels is at the heart of the project’s aims, methodology and ethos. Throughout the research process and beyond, existing links with national and local stakeholders will be strengthened and new relationships built (for example, through Advisory Group membership and consultative data collection processes), ensuring that key ‘change-maker’ partners shape and remain closely engaged with the research, providing a range of opportunities for research findings to be embedded in the practice of organisations that are well positioned to inform, shape and influence the whole sector. Through a programme of knowledge exchange events and consultations, this project will have a sustained and permanent impact in this area, improving outcomes for Muslim children in the care system in the Midlands (and beyond), and thus improving their lives

**Pathways to Impact:** The project deliverables will be designed to address different audiences including practitioners, families, policy makers and academics. A project website will developed as an open-access repository for research outcomes which is accessible to all audiences:

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| **ACADEMIC AUDIENCES**   1. Two journal articles on methodology and project findings 2. Two conference presentations     **PRACTITIONERS**   1. Practitioner Guide highlighting existing good practice, addressing gaps and presenting a brief cultural contextualisation of British-Muslim communities 2. Knowledge Exchange conference in London | **POLICY MAKERS**   1. Policy Brief that will summarise research findings and present policy recommendations     **COMMUNITIES**   1. Booklet on adoption for Muslim communities 2. Public-facing articles in community magazines/ blogs 3. Illustrated children’s book on adoption 4. Research dissemination events |

**Staffing:** The Principal Investigator **Dr Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor** is a sociologist specialising in ethnic, religious diversity in the UK and the use of democratic and participatory research methods. She has a long track record of working with British Muslim communities and is recognised both by her academic peers and Muslim communities as a reliable and trustworthy academic. She is based at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. She is an adoptive parent and therefore has both personal and professional interests in this area. She will lead this project. As outlined in the Project Outline document she will also undertake the project evaluation activities mentioned. She specialises in the Sociology of Religion with particular emphasis on democratic research methodologies that work **with** and **for** research participants, to capture the nuance and complexity of societal diversity, pluralism and everyday lived experiences of religion or belief. She is the author of *Muslim Women in Britain: Demystifying the Muslimah* (Routledge 2012), co-author of *Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts* (Bloomsbury 2013) and *Islamic Education in Britain: New Pluralist Paradigms* (Bloomsbury 2015) and co-editor *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion* (Bloomsbury 2015). (Qualifications: PhD 2010; PGDBM (MBA), 2002; BSc in Physics, 2000)

The Co-Investigator **Savita de Souza** is co-ordinator of Coram-BAAF’s Black and Minority Ethnic Perspectives Committee (BMEPAC) and chairs the CoramBAAF Private Fostering Special Interest Groups in England. She has experience of working in social care, corporate services and multi-disciplinary teams. She has worked with black minority ethnic children and communities, foster carers and adoptive parents, disabled children and their families, support groups and the placement needs of children in adoption and fostering. As such, she is involved in all aspects of CoramBAAF’s work and has a national remit. She provides advice, information, consultancy, panels and training. She develops links with other professionals and practitioners within the field of child care to exchange views, share information and to work towards an improvement of the services offered to the black minority ethnic children and children in private foster care arrangements. (Qualifications: Certificate in Social Work, 1988; Certificate in Counselling, 1992; Diploma in Training/Management, 1997; MA in Management1999)