



# **The Construction of a New Mosque in an English City: A Study of the Madina Masjid (Mosque) and Sheffield Islamic Centre**

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## 1. Introduction and Background to the Research

This report presents the findings of a research study undertaken into the development and construction of the Madina Masjid (mosque) and Sheffield Islamic Centre. The research aimed to contribute to growing academic and policy interest in the politics and processes of new Islamic buildings in Western European cities and the impacts that these new buildings have. The Madina Masjid and Sheffield Islamic Centre is a relatively large building which is a prominent architectural feature of the neighbourhood in which it is located and the wider Sheffield city centre sky line. Its construction has generated considerable interest and debate within Sheffield: *"A new landmark rises above the terraced houses of the Sharrow area of Sheffield. With its distinctive green domes and tall minarets, the city's biggest purpose-built mosque and Islamic Centre can't fail to grab the attention of locals and passing motorists"* (BBC South Yorkshire News, 23/02/2006). The mosque and Islamic Centre therefore represents an appropriate case study for exploring key issues of planning policy, religious and ethnic identity and diversity and community cohesion. In addition, previous studies of mosque buildings in English cities have not included examples from Sheffield, which therefore provides a different local context.

The research had the following objectives:

- to explore the historical development of the mosque
- to identify why there was a need for the mosque and how this need was conceptualised and articulated by mosque users, local residents, Councillors and planning officials
- to analyse the role of the planning process in the development of the mosque
- to analyse the local politics of the mosque development, including support or opposition to the new building
- to identify the factors that facilitated the mosque development and the barriers to this development
- to assess the impacts of the mosque development on the local area and the community cohesion agenda in Sheffield
- to reflect on the wider implications of our findings.

The research was funded by Sheffield Hallam University. The study is linked to a parallel study of a contemporary new mosque development in Barcelona being undertaken by researchers at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Spain.

The research was undertaken between May and September 2008. The research included:

- a review of the literature relating to the construction of mosques and social cohesion in Western European cities
- an analysis of planning documentation relating to the application and development of the Madina Masjid

- an analysis of local media coverage of the Madina Masjid and other mosques in Sheffield
- interviews with planning officers of Sheffield City Council
- interviews with Sheffield City Council Councillors
- interviews with members of the Madina Masjid management committee
- site visits to the Madina Masjid and its surrounding area.

As part of the study we had hoped to conduct a focus group with local residents, but we were unable to fulfil this element of the research programme.

The following chapter 2 of this report presents the policy and research context within which our study was carried out, highlighting key policy developments and existing academic studies of mosque developments. Chapter 3 provides an account of the development of the mosque from the time of the initial planning application in 1998 to the present. Chapter 4 highlights the main barriers and facilitating factors to the mosque's development. Chapter 5 reflects on the implications of our findings and offers some conclusions. This report also includes web links and references for further information and reading.

## 2. The Policy and Research Context

This section of the report provides a summary overview of the wider context within which the Madina Masjid development occurred, including the community cohesion agenda in England, debates over the role of religion in urban space in Western Europe and the historical local context of Sheffield.

### *Religion, Ethnicity and Community Cohesion*

Cities in Western Europe have always been sites of ethnic and religious diversity and arenas where conflicts and controversies arising from this diversity have been played out. For example, the long history of Jewish settlement in European cities, including the forced segregation of Jewish populations in *ghettos* (Waterman, 2008) and the self-segregating practices of some Ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, including the use of the *eruv* (Valins, 2003; Waterman, 2008) symbolise how religion and ethnicity may influence socio-spatial congregation and/or segregation in urban areas, arising from a complex relationship of constraint, choice, identity and cultural practices. Similarly, the waves of Irish immigration to Britain have resulted in particular patterns of settlement and, in some cases ethnic and religious tensions in cities such as Cardiff, Liverpool and Glasgow. Northern Ireland provides the starkest instances in the United Kingdom of physically and socially divided populations along the lines of ethnic, religious and political identity and affiliation (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006).

In England, the riots and urban disturbances in the northern cities and towns of Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 led to policy concerns that populations were becoming increasingly segregated on ethnic and/or religious lines, with housing and schooling processes leading to residential polarisation through which different groups were leading 'parallel lives' with little or no sites of interaction and engagement between them (Community Cohesion Independent Review team, 2001). These concerns largely focused upon South Asian and white working class communities and resulted in the development of the *community cohesion* agenda through which the government attempted to strengthen bonds between communities and foster a sense of national identity and allegiance to 'British' values. Although the rationales for the community cohesion agenda and the evidence of self-segregating practices among ethnic minority groups upon which it is premised have been subject to sustained criticism (Robinson, 2005, 2008; Phillips, 2006; Phillips et al., 2008) the government's agenda has continued to develop, most recently through a new Commission on Integration and Cohesion, which reported in 2007.

The 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001 became conflated with the disturbances in northern English towns in a new problematisation of Muslim populations in Britain in popular, media and political discourses. The London bombings of July 2005 and failed attacks in London and Glasgow in 2007 and controversies over the wearing of the *hijab* and *nijab* and 'forced' or arranged marriages amongst South Asian populations have continued to fuel controversies about the role of Islam in Britain. Some of these controversies have focused upon alleged activities in particular mosques and the government has responded by seeking to introduce new measures to regulate the governance of mosques and the role of imams (Communities and Local Government, 2007).

## ***Religion, Urban Space and Mosque Building***

Within these discourses, the 'Islamisation' of urban space in some British cities is regarded as being problematic, 'out of place' and a threat to British identity and social cohesion (Phillips, 2005) and mosques and other forms of Islamic architecture are portrayed as sites of potential insurrection (see Phillips, 2006 for a critique). This has renewed academic interest in the role of religion in the construction and use of urban space and social practices and its links to cohesion (Flint, 2009; MacDonald, 2002; Valins, 2003; Waterman, 2008). There has been a specific focus upon the processes, politics and impacts of new mosque developments (although mosques are recorded as having been present in England since the late 19th century). In a study of the contemporary relationships between the state and Muslims in Britain, France and Germany, Fetzer and Soper (2005) conclude that Britain has been relatively accommodating of the cultural needs of Muslim populations, including the facilitation of new mosques. However a series of academic studies of new mosque developments in English cities including London, Birmingham and Bradford (Gale, 2005; Gale and Naylor, 2002; McLoughlin, 2005; Naylor and Ryan, 2002) have been more critical of the role of central and local governments in the construction of mosques. These studies have identified ambiguities and contradictions in the support or opposition to new mosques amongst planners, Councillors and within Muslim communities themselves. They have also highlighted the uncertainty amongst urban policy makers about the extent to which new mosque developments contribute towards, or hinder, the promotion of community cohesion and how they are aligned with local authority equalities and diversity policies. These findings raise wider questions about the role of faith communities within community cohesion programmes at the local level. They also reveal the symbolic importance of mosques (and other religious buildings) in popular conceptions of place and place identity and how cities attempt to construct and market their 'image' as vibrant and culturally diverse locations.

### ***The Sheffield Context***

Sheffield is a large northern English city with a population in 2001 of 520,700. The 2001 Census recorded 87 percent of the city's population as being White British. Individuals of South Asian descent (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi) are the second largest ethnic group, with a population of 32,400, just over half of whom are Pakistani. 23, 891 individuals (4.64 percent of the city's population) were classified as Muslim in the 2001 Census. Sheffield has a number of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, including Burngreave to the north east of the city centre. There are also congregations of Pakistani communities in the Sharrow and Nether Edge wards to the west of the city centre, within which the Madina Mosque is located. The 2001 Census revealed that 19 and 11.4 percent of the populations of the Nether Edge and Sharrow wards respectively recorded their religious affiliation as Muslim. The pattern of historical migration saw primarily Pakistani males arrive and settle initially in Darnall and Tinsley in the east of the city, finding employment in the steel industry. As this community became more established and families grew, a South Asian population developed in Sharrow and then, reflecting some increasing affluence within this community, some households moved further towards the western suburbs of Nether Edge. The Muslim population of Sheffield (4.64 percent) in 2001 was proportionately larger than Leeds, but proportionately smaller than Burnley (6.5 percent), Oldham (11.06 percent) and Bradford (16.08 percent). Sheffield did not experience any urban disturbances in 2001 (nor has it been subject to subsequent disturbances such as those in Birmingham in 2005). The Madina Masjid is one of a number of mosques in Sheffield, located in various neighbourhoods throughout the city.

Sheffield City Council is developing an interim Community Cohesion Strategy. The Council states that; 'Community Cohesion is about recognising, supporting and

celebrating diversity. It is about creating an environment where there is mutual respect and appreciation of the similarities and differences that make people unique' (Sheffield City Council website). Developing strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds within neighbourhoods is one aim of the Council's approach. The Council also has an Equality and Diversity Policy within which it is 'committed to tackling discrimination and ensuring that people of all religions and beliefs are welcomed and provided for in Sheffield' and 'the Council understands that people with different religion and beliefs may require different services' (Sheffield City Council website). The 'religion and belief' page on the Council's website includes a link to the Sheffield Islamic Centre (the Madina Masjid). Sheffield also has a Faith Forum, a voluntary organisation formed in 2007 to support faith groups in the city. Two of the priorities for the Forum in its 2009/10 strategy are community cohesion and working in neighbourhoods. The Madina Masjid and Sheffield Islamic Centre is listed on the Sheffield Faith Forum website.

### 3. The Development and Construction of the Madina Masjid and Sheffield Islamic Centre

This section provides a brief account of the development of the Madina Masjid and Sheffield Islamic Centre, including the main drivers for its construction.

There was no local mosque in Sharrow in the 1970s and the Muslim community used a facility across the city in Attercliffe. The use of the Mount Pleasant community centre on Sharrow Lane was secured and subsequently private houses until the former co-op building on Wolseley Road was used from 1980 until the construction of the new mosque (Figure 1 below). For much of that time the community had been looking for a suitable building or site for a new mosque.

There were a number of drivers for the new mosque development. In part the proposed development reflected the extent to which the local Muslim population had become settled in the Sharrow area, the need for a community focal point and the lack of Islamic facilities locally:

*"We've been settled here [Sharrow] for a long while and if you look around, unlike other parts of the city there weren't many Islamic centres or Islamic provisions in terms of facilities in the south of Sheffield...As the community has grown and has got more settled it became quite evident and quite clear that it needed to be a central hub for our community."*

There was also recognition that the old co-op building was no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the local community: *"It had come to the end of its lifetime in terms of what was possible and what wasn't."* The building was too small and its facilities were located on four floors, the needs of the elderly were not being met because of access problems with steps, educational classes were meeting in the basement and there were fire escape concerns. The building could not provide the facilities required for prayers and services: *"Prayer is about unity, bringing people together and what we had was people being on four floors so they couldn't see the Imam and sometimes the speakers to hear him did not work."* There was also a need to provide a facility for funerals, including a washing area and mortuary. Converting the building was considered but was not feasible in terms of value for money and there was a general desire for a new facility that met community needs.

Other key drivers informing the plans for the new mosque development included providing education and other services. There was an explicit attempt to plan for the future needs of the community, including the needs of the growing population of young people. There was also a desire to avoid splits in the community on ethnic lines that may have emerged if a number of separate smaller mosques were established. This was also a driver for desiring to develop the Wolseley Road site rather than purchasing alternative sites elsewhere.

**Figure 1: The Previous Sheffield Islamic Centre on the Wolseley Road site**



The initial application for planning permission for the new mosque was developed and submitted in 1997-1998. The construction of the new mosque building began in September 2004. All of the funds for the new building have been raised by donations from within the local community- the mosque has not received any public subsidy. At the beginning of construction approximately £500,000 had been raised (out of total estimated development costs of £3.5m).

The building was designed by Archi-structure Ltd, a leading UK mosque architectural company, to a Persian design featuring arches, a dome and minarets. The building incorporates a central hall, a large washing area and a balcony.

The development process has been protracted. There was a need to undertake significant work to prepare the site and put in amenities before construction began. The development went through two full planning applications. Major delays occurred due to the complexity of assembling the land parcels and ambiguities over land titles (see the following chapter) and the development was also delayed for over two years as three local businesses challenged a road closure order required for construction activities. The businesses won their case at the magistrate court and then an appeal at the crown court before this obstacle to development was finally overcome.

By July 2008 the external structure and the rooms had been completed (see Figure 2 below). Further internal work including painting, Arabic calligraphy and text is on-going. The scale of further resources required to be raised by the community is illustrated by the internal painting of the dome costing approximately £100,000. The mosque has loans of approximately £1m and appeals for donations (including on the website and through TV stations) and fund-raising activities are continuing.

It is estimated that around 1,000 users attend Friday prayers (with this number increasing during holiday periods) with about 500 individuals using the facilities on each other day of the week. Although the mosque attracts large numbers of users from the immediate Sharrow and Nether Edge neighbourhoods, worshippers from other areas of Sheffield and beyond the city also use it.

Figure 2: The Contemporary Madina Masjid and Sheffield Islamic Centre



## 4. Facilitating Factors and Barriers

This research has identified a number of factors which facilitated the development of the mosque but also a number of issues which acted as barriers to the development. This section of the report describes each of these in turn.

### *Facilitating Factors*

One of the strengths of the initial planning application and the proposal to develop the new mosque was their basis on a rigorous and methodological assessment of contemporary and future needs in the local area. The mosque development committee produced a detailed report setting out the case for the mosque, including demographic data, future population projections (for example the growing number of young Muslims in the area) and monitoring data which detailed the numbers of individuals using the existing mosque at particular times. This approach enabled support for the mosque amongst Councillors and planners to be based upon clear evidence, which was important in ensuring that the proposal could be fully justified on 'technical need' and facility provision grounds.

A feasibility study commissioned by the mosque development committee outlined comprehensive demographic data in relation to community needs and reinforced the case for a purpose built mosque and Islamic Centre. The study provided recommendations to improve the viability of the development, for example, through income- generating activities, which involved attracting future public revenue funds for health and educational activities, as the mosque did not qualify for public funds for religious purposes.

The development was promoted as not only serving as a mosque but also for other non-religious educational activities. Local politicians bought into the fact that women's needs and provision were central to the multi-purpose development. These key considerations satisfied local political agendas and priorities, which were more concerned about the development of the local community and service provision in the neighbourhood, rather than the religious furtherance of one section of the community.

A further facilitating factor was the comprehensive attempts by the mosque committees to consult with the local community and generate widespread support. A petition in support of the development was submitted with over 1,000 signatories. This included some non-Muslim local residents (although it was acknowledged that some local residents refused to sign the petition). Support was also secured from local schools in the area and the mosque committees worked closely with Sharrow Community Forum to secure the support of, and keep informed, local voluntary and community organisations. Deliberate attempts were made to reach out to the non-Muslim population through holding planning events and inviting all sections of the local community to view and comment upon the plans. This has continued through the establishment of an official programme of visits and open days for individuals, groups and researchers. Each visit enables visitors to tour the facilities, learn about the background to Islamic belief and the activities in the mosque and to ask questions. These visits are staffed by volunteers.

The proposal received considerable support amongst local politicians and senior Council officials. Two of the three local councillors were users of the existing Islamic centre and one of the centre trustees was an ex- Lord Mayor of Sheffield and the local MP also became supportive. Hence, there was significant political influence and support for the proposed mosque. It was beneficial to have high profile support and people who were either part of, or were familiar with, the internal processes of the Council and could therefore, help to overcome some of the bureaucratic hurdles. The Chief Executive of Sheffield City Council provided constructive support to resolve problems and consistent backing to the proposal from the outset: *"There was a constant positive vibe from chief officers from the council saying 'actually we want this to happen.'"*

The development was also facilitated by a group of individual City Council planners who were supportive. A member of the mosque committee recalled an early meeting with a planner:

*"We said 'we need a mosque, we've decided on a site, we're not sure exactly religiously where we stand with mosque developments and how things work'. He took out a copy of the Koran and put it on the table, the planner did that and we were saying...it was an understanding of that issue."*

The mosque committee also procured an architect with experience and knowledge of building mosques, and this knowledge of the principles of Islamic building design assisted both the local community and the planners. This reinforced the determination of the mosque development committee to focus on the project as a technical planning development with religion as a design element. In addition, a number of the individuals from the mosque committee driving the development were local government employees and therefore: *"We knew the processes and how to go about certain things and we knew which ways to, not so much which buttons you need to press but essentially what was the process you needed to follow."*

One key element of this was ensuring transparent structures within the mosque with clearly defined remits and responsibilities, facilitating regular dialogue through internal mosque working groups. Agreement was reached to establish both a steering committee and redevelopment committee and management committee members and the trustees signed up to this. This was very important in avoiding different parties claiming to represent the mosque or local Muslim community giving conflicting messages to the Council (which had happened previously and had resulted in the loss of some potential land and buildings to a housing association).

This enabled a consistent message to be articulated within the mosque and its users and ensured that the Council had one point of contact with the mosque community. The Council also established their own link officer for the development: *"I think the thing is if you've got a community that's talking with a single voice that adds to the momentum."*

Committee members adopted a co-ordinated approach and the planning application was treated as any other bid: limiting 'emotive' responses, improving communication and transparency. A number of individuals with a variety of skill sets and transferable skills joined the Committee and they brought expertise around planning as well as project management: *"I think all of us have got local government skills and experience, we've also got technical skills and we've also got management skills."*

There were also extensive attempts to build relationships with planning officers, to engage with planning requirements and to be flexible in responding to planning demands to ensure that the Council also felt some ownership of the development:

*"What we basically did early on was build a series of relationships with key officers...we had three officers that we could continually have a dialogue with and there was a consistent approach and we ended up not just with our choice but there choice as well."*

*"We were never trying to fight the system. We were trying to work with it. We were never going to try to do something that was completely against planning terms."*

The process of dealing with objections was supported by a Sheffield City Council planning policy which attempted to identify and address racially motivated objections to planning applications which were submitted in the guise of technical objections. This allowed the planning officers to make an interpretation of the objection/s, so, for example, a petition signed by numerous people could be scrutinised to reveal that some of those having signed it lived too far away from the development to be affected by the alleged negative impacts of the proposed mosque. These factors could then be taken into account in evaluating the significance to be given to the petition in the planning decisions. Similarly, the views of a persistent objector could be examined to interpret the motivations more clearly. It was accepted by most of the research participants that generally there were more technical objections to mosque developments than other developments and that, therefore, these objections may, in part, act as a 'smokescreen' for some people's general prejudices about mosques.

Letters of support highlighted that the provision of a car park for public use would help local businesses, which was one of the contentions in earlier letters of opposition to the initial planning application and South Yorkshire Police offered words of support about how the creation of a car park would alleviate local traffic problems.

A planning policy aspect in the City Council's Unitary Development Plan provided the applicants with the scope to propose a building of architectural distinction and religious symbolism, by highlighting that the architectural expression of the communities living in Sheffield would be encouraged in appropriate places. As one research participant noted: *"The problem was with churches and older communities, they're established, there isn't any demand for churches, whereas the newer communities, they haven't got those and planning policies tend to be conservative and say preserve the traditional skyline or traditional architecture."* Contrary to this standpoint, the City Council's policy did encourage architectural expression to allow newly established communities to develop cultural and religious buildings such as mosques, and this proved beneficial for the applicants because the policy counteracted those arguments which were inherently biased towards preserving the 'traditional' skyline and architecture of the neighbourhood. In practice, however, some architectural and design elements of the mosque were toned down. For example, the minarets, which were originally intended to be more prominent in terms of their height and features, were restricted by planners.

The development also benefited from some sympathetic and positive media coverage, including from the weekly local *Sheffield Telegraph* and local radio and television stations. A development of such size and with so much local support inevitably attracted attention from the media, hence further raising its profile and encouraging people to donate because they wanted to be associated with it: *"they knew this development was happening, it was in the public eye, we were on Calendar, we were on various other things, when we laid the foundation stone I think Calendar and the BBC Look North covered it, Radio Sheffield had some stuff on the website on BBC."* However, there was some negative coverage of the development from the daily local *The Sheffield Star*.

Extensive fund-raising amongst the local community facilitated the development. This included small regular donations from mosque users, donations from businesses, appeals on local radio and television networks and a taxi-driver contribution scheme. There were some donations from local non-Muslim residents, Churches and inter-faith

groups. The fact that a local community that is not essentially affluent raised such substantial sums of money was important in demonstrating the commitment and desire for the mosque to be built. It is also very significant that no public money (especially from the local Council) was given to the development, as this was a principal cause of objections to the development in local discourses. However, despite attempts to clarify and publicise this fact, the perception that Council Tax revenue has funded the mosque remains a regular feature of on-line forums and letters to local newspapers.

## **Barriers**

A key barrier to the development project was the sheer complexity, ambiguities and technicalities of the planning process. Several 'bottlenecks' were encountered between 1997 and the present day, and each of these resulted in considerable delays and often significant additional costs and funding requirements being placed upon the local community. A number of amendments were required by planners throughout the process and delays resulted in the need for two planning applications being required.

One of these was ensuring land assembly and purchasing the parcels of land required for the development. The development process was aided to some extent by some of the surrounding land being Council-freehold. However, there were still complex and protracted negotiations around conditions of future use. There were also significant challenges arising from private land titles and lease holds being uncertain. This resulted in the Council having to trace and contact owners, including Sheffield Hallam University. In one case it took two years to track down and negotiate with an individual over a narrow strip of land that was required for the development. This became a 'ransom strip' with the individual asking for an astronomical sum of money. Although the issue was eventually resolved, the delays led to considerable frustration and doubt within the local community about the achievability of the project.

A major obstacle arose from opposition by three local businesses in 1998 to a Road Closure Order required to facilitate the construction of the new mosque. Some research participants believed that this opposition 'bordered on subtle racism' and was primarily hostility to the idea of a mosque in the vicinity rather than the technicalities of the development proposal. It is, of course, impossible to verify these claims. The ensuing court cases in the magistrates and appeal crown courts were won by the local businesses, despite support for the road closure from the Council. This led to significant delays and significant budget increases to the project. The court cases also led to very negative perceptions of the process amongst the local community and there were considerable concerns amongst local councillors about the motivations and logic of the court rulings.

Progress with the development was stalled when conditions imposed by a local businessman (main objector) selling his property to the mosque committee, stipulated that it could not be taken over for a further two years. As a result of an improving housing market, substantially more was paid for the building as a condition had been attached related to fluctuations in the market value of the property after this period. All the conditions attached to the sale added considerably to solicitor's fees and a full planning application had to be resubmitted as the 5-year term within which the build had to begin had expired.

A substantial number of further objections were made to the planning proposals and these were predominantly about technical issues, for example, anticipated problems with car parking, noise, litter etc. The objections were largely focused on issues related to parking, the disturbance caused to local residents by calls to prayer and actions causing a nuisance and damaging the environment, for example, the children already attending the mosque were accused of dropping litter and committing acts of vandalism,

and these were predicted to become worse as the mosque's capacity increased. The difficulties in distinguishing between people presenting genuine technical objections and those rooted in racist and/or prejudiced views, which were presented in the guise of technical objections, were acknowledged. By utilising a specific policy, the City Council demonstrated its commitment to overcoming such barriers. The nature of this policy is discussed in the 'facilitating factors' section of this report.

Planning policies around the 'loss of open space' became a barrier to the proposed development because the old mosque site was adjacent to a strip of overgrown and poorly used land that in planning terms was seen as essential open space which had to be protected. Even though its use was limited and its value questionable, considerable lobbying was required to address and overturn decisions around safeguarding it.

Although the support, commitment and knowledge of individual planners and councillors were key facilitating factors in the mosque development, there were some problems at the outset when a local councillor and the planning authorities explicitly prohibited an amplified *adhan* (call to prayer) despite the fact that the mosque committees had never requested this in the first place. This highlighted some of the assumptions and misinterpretations evident at the outset of the process. This was also reflected in wider negative popular perceptions about the beliefs and practices of Muslims, predating the post-9/11 rise of Islamophobia, and this hindered the planning application process according to one research participant. Concern amongst the non-Muslim community about the use of a building by a 'foreign' community for unfamiliar practices gave rise to suspicion, resulting in objections and petitions against the proposed mosque:

*"Even if they weren't having call to prayers or there wasn't very intensive use, the fact that something was called a mosque, so when you used to get a planning application you'd get petitions and all sorts."*

There were also some divisions within the local Muslim community and mosque users, arising from different interpretations of religious requirements and practices. For example the Imam did not wish to see education and prayer facilities combined as the development plans proposed. There was a particular need to build trust and links between the mosque development committees and the elderly community, in part because those individuals driving the development were not regarded as 'traditional' members of the community, or regular users of the mosque. There were also concerns that the focus on the needs of young people would result in the mosque not being used for traditional religious purposes.

The multifaceted nature of internal community politics had some bearing on the progress of the proposed development. Bringing the highly influential community leaders on side and "those individuals that carry huge swathes of people with them" was a difficult task because some had very different religious and political agendas, which were dependent on the various religious denominations people belonged to. Different sections of the same community had different allegiances according to where their roots were laid geographically, in their homelands. In addressing such complexities it was essential to secure the support of the four trustees of the centre (mosque) as they were seen as holding authority within the community as a whole.

There was also a challenge in 'selling' the mosque development to sections of the local community: *"Some of the barriers we had was about visualising...so there was a real job in terms of trying to sell an idea or a concept that you can't visually see in front of you, so those were key initial barriers: 'You're going to do a development here? No chance, it won't happen, we've been talking about it for twenty years', that sort of concept and that sort of enabling process of whereby 'oh they're never going to do it' that was a real psychological stumbling block in people's mindsets."*

Another challenge encountered in attempting to raise funds and awareness and ultimately support, from the community, was about promoting a collective vision that would be embraced by everyone. Some saw the development as another opportunity to just increase the capacity of the mosque without adding value to it in terms of facilities and outputs, whereas others, particularly Committee members, viewed it as a means of empowering future generations of the local community.

Although the development benefitted from the knowledge and professional roles of key individuals in the Muslim community, there was an issue of power and confidence amongst the wider community in understanding the planning process and interacting with the Council:

*"We've got a community here that isn't into planning, isn't into many of the professional services that you would associate...there was also a view of their experiences with the establishment as we'd say, their establishment was the Council, and I think for them a language issue was always a barrier because how do you communicate with somebody and you're talking about people who were working in the steel mills, they came over from rural community backgrounds from Pakistan or whatever part of Kashmir, so that was where they were coming from..."*

This also led to some misconceptions of the motivations and actions of the mosque development committee: *'There would be a view that 'they've spent £350,000 on a car park'.'*

Language barriers had created difficulties in the past when elder members of the community had tried to secure approval from planners, and although similar problems were not faced by the younger generation of well-versed, English-speaking committee members when holding a dialogue with planners, language had however, reversibly become a barrier when attempting to relay messages back to their own community in their language/s. The language barriers, which existed particularly between the older and younger generations, led to misunderstanding and had serious implications for fundraising when construction costs were mistranslated as £360,000 instead of £3.6million. Therefore, a target that was judged as realistic and achievable suddenly seemed unattainable: *"They originally thought we said £360,000 because you've got to understand the terminology, me saying 3.6 million and them understanding 360,000."*

A further barrier was the need for the local Muslim community and its supporters to entirely fund the development. Although this was important politically and in generating a sense of pride and ownership towards the mosque, there were also concerns amongst sections of the community about the feasibility and realism of raising the sums of money required and the mismatch between the ambitious aspirations of the development and the available funding streams. For example, approximately £300,000 needed to be raised for enabling works (water and sewage facilities) and preparing the land. This was a considerable sum for a community that was not generally affluent, especially as the use of this money was to an extent hidden and was prior to visible construction commencing.

Finally, elements of the local press, including the *Sheffield Star* in some of its early coverage, focused upon the alleged negative economic impact that the new mosque development would have upon local businesses. Although this was contrary to the support provided to the development by the Council, there was a very limited attempt made by the Council to counter these arguments by highlighting the mosque as a facility which would be key in facilitating dialogue with other religions and the wider community or as an important means of promoting Sheffield as being a multicultural city which encouraged the visual representation of Muslims as a positive sign of integration.

## 5. Conclusions

This report has aimed to describe the key features of the construction of the Madina Masjid and Sheffield Islamic Centre and to identify the factors that facilitated its development or acted as barriers. This case study of one new mosque building project raises a number of wider issues within the city of Sheffield and beyond.

This new mosque and Islamic centre symbolises the fruition of concerted efforts by the local Muslim community to establish a visible presence and a hub for their activities. It is also a positive sign of the permanency of that community and its commitment to the local neighbourhood and the wider city, especially as the mosque development was premised on the future needs of the community, including education and social welfare provision as well as religious observation. It is ironic therefore that some opposition to the mosque continues to be premised on the belief that it is 'alien' or 'out of place' in the city of Sheffield.

It is also a story of the growing confidence and capacity of the local Muslim community and it entering a new phase in its development and engagement with local agencies. As one planner put it 'the community has moved on.'

The context within which development of the mosque occurred also represents a changing social environment compared to those of previous generations:

*"I remember as a young lad somebody across the road opening a window and shouting loads of abuse on a Friday...and that was the environment that our elders had, we're not in an environment where people accepted mosques, we're not from twenty or thirty years ago as a place of saying 'that's where the Muslims go and it's a no go area, its only for Muslims' now all of a sudden they were interactive places where people can go irrespective of your religion and I think that mindset and environmental change that's taken place. I think that's basically what's been a key issue for everything."*

It is of course important to acknowledge the progress that has undoubtedly been made, but it is evident that tensions, racism and Islamophobic discourses are still evident. Mosque development committee members reported some sporadic confrontations between individual motorists and mosque users, particularly during peak times. However, more significantly, mosque windows were smashed numerous times within the space of a few weeks and cars were broken into during Ramadan and Friday prayers. These latter incidences were accepted as a regular occurrence and therefore normalised, but nevertheless created a heightened sense of insecurity among some mosque users, therefore a security guard was employed to safeguard the community's assets, including the mosque and its users. Police installed hidden cameras in the mosque and when individuals were identified, this led to tension and clashes between the local youth in the area and the perpetrators.

Security options were discussed, including the erection of a boundary fence around the mosque, but from a planning perspective this was seen as making the mosque more of a target. The other option was to restrict the movements of certain groups of mosque users to reduce risk, but this defeating the purpose of the building in that it aimed to be accessible to, for example, women, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The building

was purpose built with a separate entrance for women to give them equal and unprecedented access to the mosque's facilities.

One important point identified by a research participant was the disparity between the attention and interpretation given to traffic issues outside the mosque and other traffic congestion in the city:

*"I go to football matches and when I do go there is this disparity that people walk on the roads and do all sorts and then it's perfectly acceptable cos it's part of the British Saturday scene, you have that on a Friday prayers and that and suddenly people think 'oh what's happening?' so we're not quite embedded, it's not quite embedded in the British culture as it were and that's the next milestone, when they accept that as part of everyday use and that there's no more or less head turning and responding to anti social behaviour whether it's on a Saturday or it's some anti social behaviour outside a mosque, they get equal billing, when we reach that then I think we'll have arrived."*

It is also evident that the Madina Masjid, and other mosques in the city continue to be controversial and high profile and that events such as a new mosque construction or the recent destruction of a former mosque in a fire act as catalysts for discourses that project wider anxieties and conflicts onto these symbolic sites of Islam. New avenues for these discourses are opening up. For example, the official support of the City Council and the generally supportive line of the local media are contrasted by many of the comments made on on-line forums and blogs. Although these forums contain many voices in support of the mosque (including posts from non-Muslims), there are also regular views expressed that the mosque is alien, out of place, the site of suspicious activities and that, more fundamentally it symbolises a (negative) change to some individuals' sense of what Sheffield is or should be as well as explicit Islamophobic abuse. Worryingly, our analysis of some of these forum sites revealed that there is still a common perception that the mosque was funded by public money, to the detriment of other religious organisations or service provision. This suggests the need for the Council and other agencies to engage with these forums to provide accurate information and rebut myths. More fundamentally, it reveals somewhat of a disconnection between official discourses and some elements of popular discourses. It is important that the relative organisational and electoral weakness of the British National Party in Sheffield does not result in complacency of the scale of the challenge to tackle some commonly-held perceptions evidenced by some of these forums. Encouragingly many residents are individually challenging the negative views expressed on these sites. The Madina Masjid series of programme visits and open days are also a crucial component of facilitating a greater engagement and awareness of Islamic activity amongst non-Muslims and creating new avenues for interaction and dialogue.

There is also a need to recognise, as one research participant put it 'the need to listen to local people irrespective of who they are.' It is vitally important to recognise that residents (in Sharrow and beyond) did have 'genuine' concerns about the scale of the development, its architectural design and its suitability to its local context. These should not be dismissed as merely being Islamophobic, not least because Muslims as well as non-Muslims articulated these concerns.

The mosque development has been facilitated by the professional knowledge of a small group of individuals on the development committee and their successful engagement with planning and political processes and supportive planners, allied to robust community consultation mechanisms and clear lines of communication. The development is also testament to the financial contribution of the local community and its supporters. However it is important to note that, even with these features present, the planning process and resources involved have at times remained daunting and

significant challenges have had to be overcome. This raises the issue of the capacity within different communities to be empowered and engage with official agencies and the economic, human and social capital available to them. It is evident that many communities (including sections of the community who may oppose a development) require proactive support to enable them to participate fully and effectively in the planning process.

The fact that the mosque development was aimed at providing a range of educational and social welfare services was an important element in ensuring its support at political and officer level within the Council. There is an important argument to be made here about the role of faith-based communities in providing key services to local communities in the context of limited public service provision. This is a different argument to the need for these services to be provided to non-Muslims, but the Madina Masjid clearly has the potential to become an important neighbourhood facility to the wider communities of Sharrow.

The support of key political figures and Council officers was a major facilitating factor in the development of the mosque, but the wider strategic policies and processes of Sheffield City Council are slightly more ambiguous. The Council has an explicit policy to encourage the architectural expression of the various communities in Sheffield, and it is evident that very strong local political support for the mosque was backed up by support at senior officer level. However, the 'conservatism' of some planning processes may deter new forms of architecture, especially where assumptions are made about associated building use such as the adhan. It is also the case that, to our knowledge, the support for the development of the mosque has not, to date, been translated into utilising the mosque as an iconic image of the diversity of Sheffield, linking it more centrally to community cohesion objectives or place marketing the city in the way that some other English cities have pursued. There are also international examples of this, such as the Mevlana mosque in Rotterdam being voted the city's most attractive building in a local and national context of tensions around Islam similar to that of England (Burama, 2006; Van Ulzen, 2007). In the words of one research participant: "If we are serious about embracing multi-culturalism and embracing other communities we need a policy that encourages architectural expression [of these communities]".

## Web links

Further information about the Madina Masjid, Sheffield City Council, the Sheffield Faiths Forum and the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research may be accessed by following the web links below:

The Madina Masjid Trust and Sheffield Islamic Centre:

<http://www.madinamasjid.org.uk/>

Sheffield City Council Community Cohesion web page:

<http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/policy--performance/equality-and-diversity/community-cohesion>

Sheffield City Council Religion and Belief web page:

<http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/your-city-council/policy--performance/equality-and-diversity/religion--belief>

Sheffield City Council Planning and Development home page:

<http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/planning-and-city-development>

Sheffield Faiths Forum

<http://www.sheffieldfaithsforum.org.uk/>

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research:

<http://www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/>

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