

# Extremism in the Community: The Case of Shakeel Begg

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Tom Wilson

The Henry Jackson Society  
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## Executive Summary

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- In October 2016, Justice Haddon-Cave dismissed a libel suit against the BBC, which had been brought before the High Court of Justice by Imam Shakeel Begg of the Lewisham Islamic Centre after the BBC had described Begg as an extremist. The judge found in favour of the BBC and concluded that Shakeel Begg is “an extremist Islamic speaker who espouses extremist Islamic positions”. Following this ruling, the trustees of the Lewisham Islamic Centre released a statement disputing the judgement. Accordingly, Begg has remained in his position as Head Imam at the mosque, where he also sits on the board of trustees.
- Lewisham Islamic Centre also has a problematic record with extremist speakers. Numerous extremist figures have been invited to speak at the mosque, including some who have promoted religiously motivated violence, anti-Semitism and homophobia.
- Over many years, Shakeel Begg has established himself firmly within a network of local interfaith and community groups and has also developed strong links with a number of public bodies. These activities have brought him into close contact with schools, local authority groups, police groups, the chaplaincy of a local hospital and the chaplaincy of a London university.
- The government’s 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy and statutory Prevent duty guidance for public bodies make clear that public institutions should not be allowed to become uncontested spaces for extremists to operate and that they are not to legitimise extremists by working or meeting with them. Furthermore, since 2011 the Prevent strategy has made clear that extremists should not be used as part of counter-radicalisation efforts.
- Despite the available guidance on best practice in fulfilling the duties set out in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015), through their associations with Shakeel Begg, a number of public bodies may have failed to meet their statutory obligations as outlined by the government. In several cases it remains unclear whether the institutions in question had shown due diligence in researching Shakeel Begg’s past statements, some of which had received coverage in prominent and respected media outlets. It is also not possible to rule out the possibility that some public bodies continued to collaborate with Begg even while being aware of certain statements that he had made.
- Of particular public concern must be that some organisations, institutions and elected representatives continued to work and associate with Shakeel Begg even after the October 2016 decision in the High Court of Justice. For organisations with charitable status, knowingly and repeatedly working with extremists is a matter that can render an organisation subject to investigation by the Charity Commission, and to the penalties that may be incurred as part of such an investigation.
- Guidance is already in place for public bodies to ensure they follow good practice in working to prevent extremism in their institutions. Clearly, in practice some of these institutions appear to be failing on the matter of properly and effectively implementing procedures that are in line with that guidance. In many of these cases, more proactive engagement from outside agencies to review with institutions how they can better fulfil their statutory duties under Prevent could help rectify the problem. It is also important, however, that repercussions are in place, and when necessary invoked, for those occasions where institutions consistently neglect to properly meet these obligations; for instance with schools, which already risk being downgraded in their Ofsted review should extremism be found to be a serious problem.

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- In an effort to avoid repeating failings seen in this case, religious umbrella bodies and civil society groups might wish to consider issuing guidance to clergy, congregations and local branches on how to avoid collaborating with extremists. Additionally, such organisations may wish to put in place formalised procedures by which congregants and members can raise concerns in the event that they believe their place of worship or local chapter is associating with extremists.

## Introduction

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In June and July of 2016, a libel case took place in which Shakeel Begg, the Imam of Lewisham Islamic Centre, sought to sue the BBC for describing him as an extremist. The Imam was claiming damages in relation to a programme broadcast by BBC 1 on Sunday 3 November 2013. During that programme, a BBC presenter made the allegation that the East London Mosque had hosted “a number of extremist speakers and speakers who espouse extremist positions”. Shakeel Begg was mentioned as one such speaker and was accused of advocating Jihad.

In making his case against the BBC, Shakeel Begg framed himself as a moderate who was deeply involved in civil society and community work, in cooperation with the local police, and in extensive interfaith activities. As such, Begg claimed that the BBC’s portrayal of him had been untrue and libellous. Ultimately, however, the judge dismissed Begg’s claim against the BBC. Crucially, Justice Haddon-Cave reached his decision after undertaking his own detailed study of the Islamic religion and after hearing from academic scholars of Islam offering their opinion on behalf of both the claimant and the defence. From his own research, Justice Haddon-Cave produced a rigorous and legally applicable definition of what can be classed as Islamic extremism. It was against these criteria that Haddon-Cave reached his judgement about the character of Shakeel Begg’s public statements.

The judge’s decision to dismiss Shakeel Begg’s case against the BBC was largely based upon a series of examples brought by the defence, which demonstrated quite clearly that Begg has indeed on numerous occasions engaged in promoting extremist views and praised religious violence. Accumulatively, these pieces of evidence leave little doubt about the overt nature of Imam Shakeel Begg’s extremism. In his concluding remarks, Justice Haddon-Cave explicitly stated of Shakeel Begg, “The Claimant is an extremist Islamic speaker who espouses extremist Islamic positions,” and, “The Claimant had recently promoted and encouraged religious violence by telling Muslims that violence in support of Islam would constitute a man’s greatest deed.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Justice Haddon-Cave stated that Begg’s speeches were, “Consistent with an extremist Salafist Islamist worldview, with positions articulated on the particular issue of jihad that are violently extreme,” and concluded that, “They are redolent of Jihadi Salafism.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to determining that the BBC had indeed been justified in describing Shakeel Begg as an extremist who had used extremist rhetoric and promoted extremist views, the judge recognised that in this case the subject of interfaith and community work was particularly relevant. In large part this was on account of the way in which Begg had attempted to use his community and interfaith activities as part of his legal action against the BBC. Indeed, Begg had mobilised a significant number of his contacts from these interfaith

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<sup>1</sup> Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016, available at: <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/shakeel-begg-v-bbc-judgment-final-20161028.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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activities for the explicit purpose of bolstering his image as a moderate and constructing his case against the BBC.

Yet even prior to this it is clear that Begg's involvement in interfaith had directed attention away from his extremist and more unacceptable views. Engaging with local groups and interfaith activities appears to have provided him with a respectable public image and status, and placed him in a stronger position from which to promote his views. Reflecting on the apparent contradiction between Shakeel Begg's extensive involvement in community and interfaith activities and his known extremist statements, Justice Haddon-Cave explained:

The Claimant, Shakeel Begg, is something of a "Jekyll and Hyde" character. He appears to present one face to the general local and inter-faith community and another to particular Muslim and other receptive audiences. The former face is benign, tolerant and ecumenical; the latter face is ideologically extreme and intolerant. He has worked hard to cultivate an image of himself as a highly respected figure in the Lewisham community. However, it is clear that on occasions when it has suited him, and he was speaking to predominantly Muslim audiences and/or audiences who might be receptive to his message, he has shed the cloak of respectability and revealed the horns of extremism.<sup>3</sup>

Most significantly of all, Justice Haddon-Cave argued that not only was this moderate veneer a sham used by Begg to conceal the true nature of his radical beliefs, but this position of respectability also assisted Begg to promote extremism. The judge highlighted the reality that the hijacking of interfaith by extremists is not simply a disingenuous act, but it is also necessarily a dangerous one. Inevitably, bestowing credibility upon extremists makes the work of such preachers easier; just as it might also be noted that it makes the work of those seeking to expose extremists that much more difficult. As Justice Haddon-Cave put it in his judgement:

In my view, the Claimant's ostensible cloak of respectability is likely to have made his (extremist) message in these speeches all the more compelling and seductive to his audiences. For this reason, therefore, his messages would have been all the more effective and dangerous.<sup>4</sup>

This aspect of the Shakeel Begg case raises a number of troubling questions. The first might concern how Begg was able to use these activities and connections to conceal the true nature of his extremism for so long. But perhaps more problematic is the fact that a figure with such extreme beliefs was able to adopt a prominent role within local community groups, interfaith activities and even within certain initiatives involving the police. It remains unclear whether those who attended the court hearings as character witnesses on Shakeel Begg's behalf had first familiarised themselves with the extensive and easily accessible material evidencing his extremism. If they did not, this might be considered surprising, given that they were willing to go so far as to testify to his moderation in court. Yet if those giving testimony were ignorant of Begg's statements at the time at which their testimony was heard in court, then it is far more concerning that these same individuals and organisations – representing schools and the police – had presumably already failed to undertake adequate background checks on Shakeel Begg's views and public statements prior to working with him. Nevertheless, it would be more alarming still to imagine that these officials had in fact become aware of Begg's most extreme statements long before, and yet had chosen to engage with him nonetheless.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

## 1. Defining Islamic Extremism: a legal definition

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Justice Haddon-Cave predicated his judgement on Shakeel Begg's statements on his own study and research into the Islamic religion, its scriptures and its theology, as well as the writings and ideology of key Islamic extremist and Islamist figures. During the libel case, the court also heard evidence from two scholars of Islam: Robert Gleave, who is a Professor of Arabic Studies at Exeter University, and Dr Mathew Wilkinson, who is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Islamic Studies at SOAS.<sup>5</sup> In order to make a ruling on whether or not the statements in question should be classed as extremist, Justice Haddon-Cave established a ten-point definition of what he understood by the term "Islamic extremism". Crucially, Justice Haddon-Cave's definition of what constitutes extreme Islam takes as its measure not what is considered to be extreme by the standards of liberal Western society, but rather what can be judged as extreme by the standards established within mainstream Islamic doctrines.<sup>6</sup>

The ten positions that Justice Haddon-Cave listed as representing Islamic extremism are as follows:

1. A set of Manichean beliefs that "divide the world strictly into the Abode of Islam (Dar al-Islam), the Abode of Unbelief (Dar al-Kufr) and the Abode of War (Dar al-Harb)". This entails not only a fierce hostility to non-Muslims but also to moderate Muslims, Shia and democratic Muslim states. The ultimate goal for those harbouring this worldview is "the creation of a global Caliphate or Islamic State and the imposition of a primitive, literalist interpretation of Sharia Law by force".
2. Interpreting Jihad as an exclusively violent activity by ignoring the non-violent meaning of the term (such as spiritual striving) and collapsing its meaning into the Islamic concept of *qital* (armed conflict).
3. Disregarding Islam's own preconditions for when armed Jihad is permissible. This would mean that "terrorist insurgency, 'leaderless' jihadist attacks by groups or individuals against civilians, or the waging of aggressive war against another country or people" are all prohibited by moderate doctrines within the Islamic tradition. Encouraging them can therefore be regarded as extremist, according to Islam's own standards.
4. Transgressing the stipulations regarding how armed Jihad is to be conducted: with "the use of excessive violence, attacks on civilians, indiscriminate 'suicide' violence and the torture or the murder of prisoners", all constituting an extremist position on appropriate conduct during the waging of *qital*.
5. Arguing that violence in defence of Islam is a religious duty incumbent upon all Muslim individuals, "thus, encouraging young Muslim men or women to believe that it was their individual religious duty to go off and 'fight in the name of Allah' would be an 'extremist' Islamic position".
6. Interpreting Islamic law in such a way that it requires Muslims to break the law of the nations in which they live. This can be classified as extremist given that Sharia requires that Muslims uphold the law of the land, unless those laws explicitly seek to compel Muslims to transgress the Sharia.
7. Denouncing all non-Muslims as *Kuffar* (unbelievers). Traditionally, mainstream Islam has recognised Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" and thus not unbelievers.
8. Demanding that the "precepts of the Muslim faith negate and supersede all other natural ties, such as those of family, kinship and nation".

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<sup>5</sup> ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ibid.

<sup>7</sup> ibid.

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9. Evoking or advocating the religious rulings of extremist scholars such as Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, or the attitudes of Islamist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam.
10. The promotion of “any teaching which, expressly or implicitly, encourages Muslims to engage in, or support, terrorism or violence in the name of Allah”.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Evidence of Shakeel Begg’s Extremism

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During the course of Shakeel Begg’s libel case against the BBC, the BBC brought in evidence nine instances of public speaking by Shakeel Begg which it claimed demonstrated extremism, and justified the broadcaster’s portrayal of Begg as an extremist. The statements in question are taken from a period of almost a decade, from 2006 to 2016, and relate to a wide range of subjects. Implicit support for religious violence appears as a recurring theme throughout. In the case of the large majority of these pieces of evidence, Justice Haddon-Cave found in favour of the BBC, concurring that they did indeed represent instances of Islamic extremism.

### *2.1. Kingston University Speech (2006)*

In October 2006, Shakeel Begg delivered a talk to the University of Kingston Islamic Society, the contents of which were recorded by *The Sunday Times* journalist Abul Taher. During the course of his address, Begg made a number of statements that appeared to be supportive of terrorism and violent Jihadism. Referring to the ongoing terrorist insurgencies being carried out by Islamists in Chechnya, Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Begg commented, “No this is not terrorism. This is courage this is good the person is defending himself and his family and his womenfolk and his land and his deen this is something which is good.” Later in the same speech Begg went on to say, “You want to make jihad? Very good. Don’t shout and scream and fight with your Muslim brother who is doing something else for the deen. Take some money and go to Palestine and fight, fight the terrorists, fight the Zionists in Palestine if you want to do this.”<sup>9</sup>

On the matter of this speech the judge concurred with the BBC that this was indeed evidence of extremism, stating, “The Claimant was espousing extremist Islamic positions and promoting or encouraging religious violence, in particular by exhorting his audience to travel to engage in armed jihad (qital) in Palestine.”<sup>10</sup>

### *2.2. Advice to Tawfique Chowdhury (2009)*

In December 2008 the Islamic scholar Sheikh Tawfique Chowdhury gave a talk to counter-terrorism officers in Cardiff as part of an effort to facilitate their work with the Muslim community to tackle extremism. A couple of months later, in February 2009, a piece authored by Shakeel Begg appeared on a number of Islamic websites, condemning and demonising Chowdhury for his work with the police in their efforts to combat terrorism.

During the course of the court hearing, Begg sought to use his own engagement with police as evidence of his claimed moderation. However, when it came to Sheikh Chowdhury’s counter-extremism work with the police, in his 2009 statement Begg had this to say of Chowdhury: “I was deeply shocked and appalled by his

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

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enthusiasm for collaboration with a body that has failed its [sic] own war against Islam and the Muslims at home and abroad.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Begg went on to vilify the counter-terror officers as the devil and the enemies of Islam by accusing Chowdhury of “signing a deal with the devil or joining any sort of alliance ... with the brutal, cunning and oppressive anti-terrorism workforce”. Finally, Begg framed Chowdhury as having “clearly taken side with the enemies of Islam the Muslims”.<sup>12</sup>

Justice Haddon-Cave expressed his judgement that in his attack on Sheikh Tawfique Chowdhury, Shakeel Begg had “espoused extremist Islamic positions”, and that his remarks were “also intemperate in the extreme”.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the judge pointed out that Begg’s “speech would act as strong active discouragement to any Muslim thinking of co-operating with or reporting concerns to the UK counterterrorism authorities”.<sup>14</sup>

### *2.3 Deviant Groups Speech (2009)*

In May 2009, Shakeel Begg delivered a series of seminars at the Islamic Centre of Lewisham that focused on “deviant groups” within the Islamic community. During the course of his lecture, Begg appeared to quote approvingly a number of extremist passages written by Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Baz which fiercely attacked Muslim societies that do not implement Islamic law, and another advocating “fighting the Jews in an Islamic Jihad”. Begg made clear to his listeners that the term Jihad should be understood as meaning violence, and explained, “It has a religious definition, a religious definition, which refers to physically fighting in the path of Allah.”

Discussing the beliefs of Sheikh bin Baz, Begg stressed that “Jihad in the path of Allah is one of the best methods of getting closer to Allah”. He further advocated Jihad on the grounds that it assists in “making the religion of Allah the Exalted supreme, and suppression of the Disbelievers and Hypocrites and destroying the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and facilitating the propagation of Islam all over the world”. As well as praising what he referred to as the “legitimate jihad such as Palestine, such as Chechnya, such as Afghanistan”, Begg told his listeners that as Muslims, according to the Quran, “‘Fighting is prescribed upon you’.”<sup>15</sup>

In his concluding remarks regarding Shakeel Begg’s 2009 Deviant Groups speech, Justice Haddon-Cave affirmed his judgement that Begg had indeed “espoused extremist Islamic positions and promoted or encouraged religious violence”. The judge went on to express the view that “the DEVIANT GROUPS (2009) is all about encouraging aggressive, physical jihad on behalf of Islam”.<sup>16</sup> Later in his judgement, Justice Haddon-Cave stated that that speech “is sufficient to make good the BBC’s case on justification on its own”.<sup>17</sup>

### *2.4. Aafia Siddiqui Speech (2010)*

On 28 March 2010, Shakeel Begg gave a speech at a rally in support of the convicted terrorist Aafia Siddiqui. With Siddiqui having been convicted in the United States for his attempt to murder a US serviceman, the rally was held outside the American embassy in London. During the course of the speech, Begg spoke of Malcom X and claimed:

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

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He would charge the American Government of being the greatest oppressor on earth. The greatest tyrant on earth. The greatest bootlegger on earth. The greatest kidnapper on earth. The greatest criminal on earth and the greatest rapist on earth. But, he would have added one more. He would have added the greatest terrorist on earth.<sup>18</sup>

Shakeel Begg went on to engage in the familiar Islamist rhetoric of chastising Muslim states that maintain alliances with the United States. Speaking of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Begg claimed that they “oppress and sell their people to the American Government for a few dollars”.<sup>19</sup> Invoking similar accusations against other Muslims who cooperate with non-Muslims, Begg accused, “Those who side with them, against the Muslims, side with the oppression and with Kufr and injustice against the Muslims, then they are with them.”<sup>20</sup>

The judge concluded that in this instance Shakeel Begg had indeed “espoused extremist Islamic Positions”. In his analysis, Justice Haddon-Cave noted that in his speech Begg “accuses the American Government of ‘tyranny’, ‘oppression’ and ‘terror’ against the Muslim people. The speech is redolent of the Manichean ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ worldview”. The judge further highlighted that Shakeel Begg “brands those who collaborate with the Americans as religiously violating Allah’s principles and being infidels (kuffar) themselves”.<sup>21</sup>

### *2.5. CAGE Prisoners Speech (2010)*

In August of 2010, Shakeel Begg spoke at the annual fundraising dinner of the group CAGE, which that year was focused on the subject of alleged extra-judicial killings. During his address at that engagement, Begg spoke supportively of key extremist ideologues such as Hassan al-Banna, Abul Ala Maududi, Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam. He also endorsed Muslims travelling to conflict zones for the purpose of Jihad, saying:

It’s inspiring to be amongst some of our brothers who made Hijra in the path of Allah the Exalted, who made jihad in the path of Allah the Exalted and who suffered in the path of Allah the Glorified and Exalted, our brothers from Guantanamo Bay.<sup>22</sup>

In Justice Haddon-Cave’s judgement, the speech for CAGE included the encouragement of religious violence, and that in his remarks Shakeel Begg had been “espousing extremist Islamic positions, and promoting and encouraging violent Jihad in the name of Islam”.<sup>23</sup>

### *2.6. HHUGS Speech (2011)*

The following year, in March 2011, Shakeel Begg spoke at the annual dinner for Helping Households Under Great Stress (HHUGS). This is a charity that provides support to the families of those arrested for terror-related offences. The BBC brought the speech to the court’s attention on account of the fact that Begg had spoken approvingly about “making Jihad in the path of Allah”, describing Jihad as “the greatest of deeds that a Muslim can take part in”.<sup>24</sup> However, it could not be definitively established that Begg had been referring to

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

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armed Jihad on this occasion. The BBC had not placed great weight on the importance of the speech, and as such the judge also refrained from commenting explicitly on whether or not the speech was extremist. However, Justice Haddon-Cave did note that in the view of scholars advising the court hearing, Begg's primary purpose in this speech had been to encourage charitable giving, rather than the encouragement of armed Jihad.<sup>25</sup>

### *2.7. Belmarsh Prison Speech (2011)*

Later that year, in August of 2011, Shakeel Begg addressed a rally that took place outside Belmarsh prison, where most of the UK's most prominent terror convicts are incarcerated, including figures such as Abu Hamza. Begg spoke of how the rally was being held to "show our love and unity with our brothers in Belmarsh".<sup>26</sup> The Imam again spoke in support of leading extremist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam.

In his concluding remarks, Justice Haddon-Cave confirmed his belief that during the Belmarsh sermon Shakeel Begg had "espoused extremist Islamic positions and promoted or encouraged religious violence".<sup>27</sup> The judge stressed his view that the address Begg had given on this occasion "was particularly sinister". He went on to explain that what Begg "was, in truth, seeking to do was to signal sub silentio, his unalloyed admiration and praise for the Belmarsh Muslim prisoners for what they had done". Justice Haddon-Cave further elaborated that he believed that Shakeel Begg had been "not only expressing his sympathy and solidarity with the Belmarsh Muslim prisoners' for their plight, but also approval of their crimes".<sup>28</sup>

### *2.8. Lewisham Islamic Centre Invitations to Speakers*

As part of the BBC's effort to establish in court that it would be accurate to describe Shakeel Begg as an extremist, the case was made that between 2010 and 2014 the Lewisham Islamic Centre had extended invitations to numerous extremist speakers. In his defence, Shakeel Begg pointed out that he had not been a member of the mosque's management committee between December 2009 and August 2011, and had been an employee of the Redbridge Islamic Centre when many of these individuals had been invited to speak at Lewisham. As such, the judge chose to ignore this matter.<sup>29</sup>

However, while this issue was not dwelt upon during the court case, the extensive list of speakers invited by Lewisham Islamic Centre would appear to indicate a problem of extremism that may exist with that mosque and the senior figures involved with its management. This problem may well extend far beyond Shakeel Begg and his position as Head Imam to that community.

### *2.9. Lewisham Islamic Centre Press Statements*

The BBC also brought as evidence of Shakeel Begg's extremism a series of Lewisham Islamic Centre (LIC) press statements, which it was confirmed Shakeel Begg had been involved in authoring. In particular, the BBC directed the court's attention to an open letter published by the LIC on 26 January 2016. The mosque's

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

statement had been released in response to a letter sent to many Muslim community leaders by Eric Pickles, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lord Ahmad. This initial letter had been sent following the Islamist terror attacks in Paris and expressed the British government's belief that the attacks counted as a hijacking of the Muslim religion, and as such invited Muslim community figures to work with the government in tackling extremism.

The Lewisham Islamic Centre's statement in response to this outreach condemned the government letter as "insulting" and accused the government of singling out Muslims. It went on to reject the notion that any responsibility for extremism or terrorism lay with Muslim leaders. Justice Haddon-Cave described this second letter as a "manifest overreaction to a perfectly sensible and unobjectionable letter from the Secretary of State". While he did not class the letter as evidence of extremism, the judge did express his opinion that the letter "re-enforces the picture of the Claimant as someone who expresses intemperate views".<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Shakeel Begg's Associations with Public Bodies and Community Organisations

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In his concluding remarks on Shakeel Begg's libel case against the BBC, Justice Haddon-Cave stated that Imam Begg had "worked hard to cultivate an image of himself as a highly respected figure in the Lewisham community".<sup>31</sup> However, the judge went on to state his view that Begg had used this "cloak of respectability" to hide the true nature of his extremism.<sup>32</sup> The consequence of this, the judge argued, was that Begg's ability to promote extremism had been made more effective on account of the standing and legitimacy lent to him by his interfaith and community work.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Justice Haddon-Cave expressed his belief that while Shakeel Begg had primarily reserved his extremist views for "predominantly Muslim audiences and/or audiences who might be receptive to his message", on the occasions when he had expressed these views openly, his words had been made all the more "compelling and seductive",<sup>34</sup> and therefore dangerous, precisely because of the position he had been able to gain in the wider community.

As this case highlights, extremist speakers may use associations with public institutions to gain legitimacy that allows them to better promote extremist views. The government's October 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy recognises this and explicitly seeks to prevent public bodies from bestowing legitimacy upon extremists through association with them. Additionally, the Counter-Extremism Strategy seeks to address the threat from extremists using public institutions as places from which to promote their ideas, and as such commits to ensuring that no public institution becomes an uncontested space for extremists to operate. The earlier 2011 Revised Prevent Strategy had already emphasised that public bodies delivering on this strategy were not to use extremists as part of efforts to confront radicalisation, nor would public funding be allowed to go to extremist organisations.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> 'Prevent Strategy', HM Government, June 2011, available at:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf), last visited: 14 February 2017.

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In March 2015, the government published statutory guidance on the Prevent duty for the relevant authorities covered in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, which had officially received royal assent at the beginning of February 2015. The duties put in place by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act are incumbent on local authorities, schools, universities, NHS Trusts, prisons and the police. Furthermore, the 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy sets out an approach for countering and preventing extremism in charities, places of worship and civil society groups. What the Shakeel Begg case makes apparent is that a number of public bodies and other organisations were falling short of the Revised Prevent Strategy guidance prior to February 2015, that some bodies continued to fail in their duties after the implementation of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act and the accompanying statutory Prevent duty guidance, and that others continued to neglect this duty even after Begg's extremism became certified in the High Court of Justice judgement in October 2016.

### *3.1. Lewisham Islamic Centre*

In 2011, the government named Lewisham as one of 25 areas in the United Kingdom that needed to be given priority within the Prevent Counter-Radicalisation Strategy.<sup>36</sup> As one of these areas, additional funding and attention was pledged to help confront extremism in Lewisham. Inevitably, the question arises as to where Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre fit into the wider challenge of extremism in that community. In particular, there is the matter of whether extremism at the Lewisham Islamic Centre is a problem that extends beyond the views and pronouncements of the mosque's Imam. Following the judgement by Justice Haddon-Cave that the BBC had indeed been accurate in describing Shakeel Begg as an extremist, the trustees of Lewisham Islamic Centre released a statement expressing their "unequivocal and unwavering continued support" for Begg and dismissed the judgement against him as "unfair and pervasively one sided", being replete with "incorrect and fanciful assumptions".<sup>37</sup> The trustees stressed their opinion that "Imam Begg is not an extremist, has never espoused extremist views, nor is he by any stretch of the imagination an extremist speaker". Furthermore, the statement from the mosque's trustees concluded:

Imam Begg is a pillar of the community, and to decontextualize the words used in some of his speeches and rule them "coded" language to espouse extremist Islamic positions is to stretch the language of extremism and terrorism beyond breaking point. For the avoidance of doubt, the LIC unequivocally condemns all forms of unlawful violence and terrorism. Imam Begg and the LIC distance themselves from the views attributed to him in this judgement because these are not shared or endorsed by either.<sup>38</sup>

Shakeel Begg remains both head Imam and a trustee at the Lewisham Islamic Centre, something which would appear to further represent a clear indication that the institution does indeed endorse the views that Begg has promoted, even while the trustees do not acknowledge such views as being extreme. While the libel case did not explicitly seek to answer the question of whether the Lewisham Islamic Centre has a wider problem with extremism beyond Imam Begg's position there, the fact that the mosque has hosted a number of extremist preachers over the years was acknowledged.<sup>39</sup> During the court hearing, the defence for the BBC noted that between 2010 and 2014 the mosque hosted Bilal Phillips, Abdullah Hakim Quick, Murtaza Kahn, Haitham Al-Haddad and Uthman Lateef.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Imam Shakeel Begg Vs the BBC, Statement of the Trustees. Lewisham Islamic Centre, 29 October 2016, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/pressrelease/Imam%20Shakeel%20Begg%20Vs%20BBC%20Trustees'%20Statement%20-%20October%2029th%202016.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

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Crucially, during the libel case it was argued that Begg could not be held responsible for the invitations extended to these speakers, as he was employed at Redbridge Islamic Centre and not a member of the mosque's management committee during the period that most of these individuals had visited.<sup>41</sup> This, however, would imply that it was others at Lewisham Islamic Centre who were bringing extremist preachers into the mosque. Furthermore, figures such as Haitham Al-Haddad have spoken at LIC on several occasions while Shakeel Begg was Imam, including in 2008 when Haddad is reported to have spoken about the importance of Jihad, the obligation to hate non-Muslims and the acceptability of killing apostates.<sup>42</sup>

There have also been a number of high-profile cases of individuals who attended Lewisham Islamic Centre and who went on to commit terrorism offences. These have included the killers of Lee Rigby – Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale –<sup>43</sup> as well as Grace Kadijah Dare, the teenager who travelled to Syria to join Islamic State and whose son later featured in IS execution and propaganda videos.<sup>44</sup> In 2013, speaking with regard to the Lewisham Islamic Centre and Lee Rigby's killers, a senior figure in Whitehall told the *Daily Telegraph*, "It does attract a radical crowd and radical speakers and has its fair share of converts. From that perspective it is significant. Adebolajo and Adebowale did go there, and anywhere that attracts extremists is of interest."<sup>45</sup>

As a registered charity, the trustees of the Lewisham Islamic Centre are obliged by Charity Commission guidelines to deal "responsibly with concerns of the charity's possible links with extremist activity".<sup>46</sup> However, in its response to an *Evening Standard* article raising concerns about the above individuals, the Lewisham Islamic Centre released a statement dismissing the concerns in the story as "scandalous and sensationalist" and instead suggested that the paper should track individuals who travel from the UK to Israel, and particularly those who join the Israeli Defence Forces.<sup>47</sup>

Despite serious concerns that go back over a number of years about the presence of extremism and extremists at Lewisham Islamic Centre, the mosque has continued to receive visits from prominent figures within the Lewisham community. The website of the mosque also features an impressive list of supportive testimonials from key local organisations and individuals, including the police station, the NHS Trust, charities and a Member of Parliament, as well as from other faith leaders and places of worship.<sup>48</sup> Among those who provided testimonials is Labour MP Heidi Alexander. In her testimonial, Alexander, who has also spoken at the mosque on a number of occasions, stated:

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> 'Shakeel Begg and Haitham Haddad', Harry's Place, 28 January 2015, available at: <http://hurryupharry.org/2015/01/28/shakeel-begg-and-haitham-haddad/>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>44</sup> 'Investigation: the chilling tale of how a typical Lewisham teen became an Isis bride in Syria', *Evening Standard*, 25 July 2014, available at: <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/london-life/investigation-the-chilling-tale-of-how-a-typical-lewisham-teen-became-an-isis-bride-in-syria-9628523.html>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>45</sup> 'Lee Rigby killers had links to Lewisham mosque that "attracts radicals"', *The Telegraph*, 19 December 2013, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10518792/Lee-Rigby-killers-had-links-to-Lewisham-mosque-that-attracts-radicals.html>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>46</sup> 'Protecting charities from abuse for extremist purposes', Charity Commission for England and Wales, HM Government, January 2013, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protecting-charities-from-abuse-for-extremist-purposes/chapter-5-what-the-charity-commission-expects-of-trustees>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>47</sup> 'Press Statement in response to the Evening Standard's article of 25 July 2014', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 29 July 2014, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/pressrelease/14-07-29%20-%20Response%20to%20the%20Evening%20Standard.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>48</sup> 'Testimonials', Lewisham Islamic Centre, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/testimonials.php>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

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The Lewisham Islamic Centre is an important and growing place of worship in our community. During my time as the Member of Parliament for Lewisham East I have found the men and women I have met at the mosque to be engaging and thoughtful. It is becoming an established part of Lewisham – an open, tolerant and diverse part of South East London.<sup>49</sup>

Heidi Alexander’s office did not provide comment on whether or not, in light of Begg’s extremist comments – and the extremist, anti-Semitic and homophobic speakers hosted at the mosque – she believes the LIC contributes to making Lewisham “open, tolerant and diverse”.

### *3.2. The Police*

The government’s 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy identifies the police as having a crucially important role to play in confronting extremism. Particularly relevant to the Lewisham case is the specification in that strategy that the police are to work with local authorities to take seriously complaints and concerns about extremism raised by those in the local community, for the purpose of tackling that extremism and keeping the public informed about their actions.<sup>50</sup> The Prevent duty guidance also stresses the centrality of the role of the police in working with other agencies in helping to assess the risk of radicalisation, to assist with the local delivery of Prevent and, where necessary, to disrupt extremist activity.<sup>51</sup> More broadly, the police are included in the commitments outlined in the government’s Counter-Extremism Strategy, which explicitly oblige public bodies not to engage with extremist organisations or individuals. As the official extremism strategy states, “We will ensure that the public sector consistently avoids giving extreme groups the air of legitimacy by meeting or working with them.”<sup>52</sup>

In Imam Shakeel Begg’s case, on a number of occasions he has publicly engaged in extremist rhetoric against both the police and Muslims who engage with the police on counter-extremism efforts. Particularly notable was Begg’s 2009 statement condemning Tawfique Chowdhury for his cooperation with the police, where the Imam described the police as “the devil”, as “the brutal, cunning and oppressive anti-terrorism workforce”, and finally as “the enemies of Islam”.<sup>53</sup> In a 2014 speech for HHUGS, Begg also referred to an undercover counter-terrorism officer as a *munafiq*,<sup>54</sup> a term for a hypocrite or traitor, one that in the context might even be associated with the language of incitement. In the same speech, Begg presented counter-terrorism legislation as “terror towards the Muslim community”, specifically targeting the Islamic community, “that will be making the lives of Muslims a nightmare”.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> ‘MP Heidi Alexander – Testimonial’, Lewisham Islamic Centre, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/plugindata/testimonials/Heidi%20Alexander%20MP.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Counter-Extremism Strategy’, HM Government, October 2015, available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/470088/51859\\_Cm9148\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Revised Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales’, HM Government, March 2015 (revised July 2016), available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/445977/3799\\_Revised\\_Prevent\\_Duty\\_Guidance\\_\\_England\\_Wales\\_V2-Interactive.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445977/3799_Revised_Prevent_Duty_Guidance__England_Wales_V2-Interactive.pdf), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Counter-Extremism Strategy’, HM Government, October 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Shakeel Begg Denigrating the Police’, YouTube, 30 October 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr3Bf8qVWjc>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

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Despite this, and despite the government's specification that public institutions are not to give extremists "the air of legitimacy by meeting or working with them",<sup>56</sup> in recent years Lewisham police have established a number of very public links with Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre. On occasion, this has taken the form of police visits to the mosque during public events,<sup>57</sup> but there have also been more practical and concrete connections. Begg has been a member of a number of local community groups with relevance to the police in Lewisham, including the Hate Crime Working Group, the Safer Neighbourhood Team, Lewisham Community Police Consultative Group and the Lewisham Independent Advisory Group. Shakeel Begg's involvement with these groups were brought as evidence of his moderate character during the libel case against the BBC. Significantly, during that court case, Begg received supportive testimony from Chief Inspector Graham Price, who was also part of the Lewisham Community Police Consultative Group.<sup>58</sup>

Previously, Chief Inspector Price had provided a testimonial for the Lewisham Islamic Centre website in which he stated, "We regard LIC as contributing to community safety through their valuable work and high standing in the local area."<sup>59</sup> In his testimony on behalf of Shakeel Begg during the libel case, the court documents note that Inspector Price referenced Begg's work with the police and described Begg's opposition to the government's counter-radicalisation Prevent programme as being "principled".<sup>60</sup>

The Metropolitan Police did not provide comment on Chief Inspector Graham Price's testimony given during the libel case, nor did they comment on his claim that Shakeel Begg's opposition to Prevent has been principled. However, regarding the testimonial provided by Chief Inspector Price for the Lewisham Islamic Centre, the police said the following:

The testimonial was written some years ago and similar testimonials were provided not only to Lewisham Islamic Centre but to other faith and community groups in Lewisham borough. The testimonial merely outlines the work the police in the borough have done and will continue to do to promote peace, tolerance and respect of people with different beliefs. The removal of the testimonial from the website is a matter for the Lewisham Islamic Centre.<sup>61</sup>

Regarding Shakeel Begg's involvement with the Lewisham Community Police Consultative Group and the Safer Neighbourhoods Board, the Metropolitan Police commented:

The Lewisham Community Police Consultative Group has now been replaced by the Safer Neighbourhoods Board and is independent of the police. The police have no influence or say over membership.<sup>62</sup>

As for Shakeel Begg's membership of other associated groups, the police said:

We can confirm Mr Begg was a member of the Independent Advisory Group (IAG) in Lewisham but has since stepped down. The IAG is a body set up to advise police on how best to deal with the

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<sup>56</sup> 'Counter-Extremism Strategy', HM Government, October 2015.

<sup>57</sup> 'Lewisham Police Visit the Centre', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 21 October 2014, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/NL-14-10-24.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>58</sup> 'History of the LCPCG', Lewisham Council Website, available at: <https://www.lewisham.gov.uk/inmyarea/publicsafety/Lewisham-Community-Police-Consultative-Group/Pages/History-LCPCG.aspx>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>59</sup> 'Lewisham Police Station Testimonial', Lewisham Islamic Centre, available at: <http://lewishamislamiccentre.com/plugindata/testimonials/Lewisham%20Police%20Station.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>60</sup> Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with the Metropolitan Police, 18 January 2017.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

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concerns of the diverse communities in London. Membership is at the chair's invitation. The IAG can help contact all parts of the community. The advice given is independent of the police.

Mr Begg along with the Lewisham Islamic Centre are also involved in the Lewisham borough faith group which was formed in 2012 in an effort to encourage dialogue and cohesion across the borough, and membership is open to all faith groups in Lewisham.<sup>63</sup>

### *3.3. Schools*

In the government's 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy, considerable emphasis is placed on the importance of keeping extremism out of schools and away from young people. The strategy references Peter Clarke's investigation into allegations of extremism and entryism in a number of Birmingham schools.<sup>64</sup> As that document notes, one of the areas of concern raised by Peter Clarke was that of "extremist speakers making presentations to pupils".<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, the government's Prevent duty guidance stresses that schools need to demonstrate that they are protecting children from the risk of being drawn into extremism, and that this should include clear protocols for ensuring that external speakers are of an appropriate nature.<sup>66</sup>

More detailed guidance for how to best fulfil statutory duties with regard to external speakers has been set out for schools at the Department for Education's Educate Against Hate website. The advice given there stresses the importance of conducting research into potential external speakers, taking the status and reputation of the speaker into consideration, as well as the individual's previous comments.<sup>67</sup> The guidance provided recommends that the necessary research make use of search engines and social media sites, and reminds teaching staff that it is good practice to look beyond the first page of search results.<sup>68</sup> The guidance given also cautions teaching staff that they are "likely to face prohibition if they deliberately allow exposure of pupils to such actions that undermine fundamental British values including promoting political or religious extremism by inviting individuals to speak in schools".<sup>69</sup> Equally, Ofsted is now required to assess schools on how they act to safeguard children from extremism.<sup>70</sup>

Despite Shakeel Begg's numerous extremist statements, many of them highly publicised by the media, a number of local schools have chosen to engage with Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre over the years. This has involved both Imam Begg speaking in schools and groups of students being taken to meet with Begg during visits to the mosque. Indeed, Begg's extensive work with schools was offered as evidence during the libel case against the BBC. Retired schoolteacher Gerald Rose spoke on Begg's behalf in court and praised the Imam's work with local schools, including Jewish ones.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, another teacher, Simon Marks, commended Begg's work in the community.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> 'Counter-Extremism Strategy', HM Government, October 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> 'Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales', HM Government, March 2015, available at: [http://counterextremism.lgfl.org.uk/downloads/Prevent\\_Duty\\_Guidance\\_England\\_Wales.pdf](http://counterextremism.lgfl.org.uk/downloads/Prevent_Duty_Guidance_England_Wales.pdf), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>67</sup> 'Hosting Speakers on School Premises', Educate Against Hate, available at: [educateagainsthate.com/download/12](http://educateagainsthate.com/download/12), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> 'Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales', HM Government, March 2015.

<sup>71</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

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London schools that have extended invitations to Shakeel Begg in recent years include Deptford Green, which hosted him as speaker at the opening ceremony for its new building in September 2012,<sup>73</sup> while Trinity School in Lewisham hosted him in 2013 as part of a class organised by the head of Religious Education at the school.<sup>74</sup> A number of others ran trips to Lewisham Islamic Centre, including All Saints Church of England Primary School in Blackheath in February 2015,<sup>75</sup> John Donne Primary School in Southwark on 16 March 2015,<sup>76</sup> and Saint Mary's Church of England Primary School in Lewisham on 23 March 2015.<sup>77</sup>

Deptford Green and Trinity Schools both declined to comment on their decision to invite Shakeel Begg to their school premises. Saint Mary's Church of England Primary School in Lewisham and John Donne Primary School in Southwark also both declined to comment on their decision to take pupils to the Lewisham Islamic Centre to meet with Shakeel Begg, and did not comment on whether or not they believed this conflicted with their statutory duties imposed by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015).

All Saints Primary School also declined to provide comment. However, in a telephone conversation with the author of this report in January of this year, the head teacher confirmed that quite a close relationship still exists between Shakeel Begg and the school.

St John Baptist (Southend) CE Primary School provides another particularly stark example of how schools do not always have a clear understanding of extremism and the government's guidance on the subject, and that they do not always show adequate due diligence when researching external speakers and institutions. In January 2017, the website of that primary school still featured documents promoting the school's links with Shakeel Begg. One document, published in October 2015, stated that in November 2014 "the duty was placed on all schools to actively promote the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs".<sup>78</sup> However, the same document mentions the school's activities with Shakeel Begg as an example of how the school is working to uphold British values.<sup>79</sup> This affiliation with Begg was reiterated in the school's updated British Values document for October 2016, which stated, "We have developed strong and ongoing links with Imam Shakeel Begg and The Lewisham Islamic Centre," and further mentioned, "We arrange regular visits to the Mosque."<sup>80</sup>

St John Baptist (Southend) CE Primary School declined to comment on whether it had any concerns that its associations with Shakeel Begg might actually undermine the school's commitment to promoting British values or its ability to fulfil its statutory duties under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015). However, both of the documents referencing Shakeel Begg have been removed from the website following the school being contacted as part of the research for this report.

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<sup>73</sup> 'Great Feedback on Opening Ceremony', Deptford Green School, available at: <http://www.deptfordgreen.lewisham.sch.uk/?PageID=364>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>74</sup> 'Trinity Welcomes Lewisham Imam for RE Workshop', Trinity School, available at: <http://www.trinitylewisham.org/news/news-archive-2013/288-trinity-welcomes-lewisham-imam-for-re-workshop.htm>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>75</sup> 'All Saints Church of England Primary School from Blackheath Visit LIC', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 24 February 2015, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNEWS-SCHOOLVISITTOLEWISHAMMOSQUE-2015-02-24.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>76</sup> 'John Donne Primary School Visit the Centre', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 16 March 2015, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNEWS-SCHOOLVISITBYJOHNDONNE-2015-03-16.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>77</sup> 'Saint Mary's Church of England Primary School Visit the Centre', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 23 March 2015, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNews-SchoolVisit-StMarysChurch-2015-03-23.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>78</sup> 'British Values Statement', Saint John Baptist (Southend) Primary School website, October 2015, available at: <http://www.sjb.lewisham.sch.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/British-Values-Statement.pdf>, last visited: 12 January 2017.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*



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### *3.4. Local Authorities*

The Counter-Extremism Strategy outlined by the government emphasises that local authorities have a crucial part to play in guarding communities against extremism, while acknowledging that local government needs to do more to address concerns effectively and decisively.<sup>81</sup> That strategy also obliges public bodies, such as local authorities, not to legitimise extremists by meeting or collaborating with them.<sup>82</sup> In its statutory Prevent duty guidance, the government similarly stresses that it expects local authorities to avoid working with groups engaged in extremist activity, or those espousing extremist views.<sup>83</sup>

Despite this guidance from the government, Lewisham Council has had a number of points of contact with Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre. One of the most significant has been Begg's membership of the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) for the London Borough of Lewisham.<sup>84</sup> SACRE meets throughout the year and is tasked with advising the local authority on the religious education provided in schools in the Lewisham area, as well as monitoring the delivery of that education. Additionally, SACRE works directly with the schools themselves to support the provision of religious education.

The SACRE groups that exist throughout the UK are required to include representatives from local schools and religious groups. Nevertheless, it is highly questionable whether someone who holds to the kind of extreme interpretation of Islam promoted by Imam Begg should be advising a local authority on religious education in schools. Indeed, minutes from a SACRE meeting that took place in September 2014 show that Shakeel Begg was advising the Council on radicalisation among young people following the Trojan Horse scandal: there had been an organised effort by a group of extremists to introduce Salafist ideology into a number of Birmingham schools by entering the boards of governors.<sup>85</sup> The minutes record that Begg had sent the committee members "a blog" post to inform their understanding of the situation at the Birmingham schools.<sup>86</sup> Evidently, the then head of SACRE, Dinah Griffith, had noted a number of conclusions from the material Begg had sent her, including that those involved in the Trojan Horse scandal had become involved in the schools with "the clear aim of improving the educational chances of children in the community" and that "weak governance" had been a key issue.<sup>87</sup> There was no mention, however, of a concerted attempt by extremists to take over the running of schools in Birmingham for ideological motives.<sup>88</sup>

Additionally, as part of efforts to ensure that events in Birmingham were not repeated in Lewisham, the minutes show that Dinah Griffith and Shakeel Begg discussed creating a programme for training members of the Muslim community to become school governors.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the Council expressed approval of Begg's proposal to hold a joint event with SACRE at the Lewisham Islamic Centre. The proposed event would be for teachers and parents, with the expressed intention of aiming to create greater understanding in the wake of the events at the schools in Birmingham.<sup>90</sup> The SACRE members also praised Begg for his "work in the media, condemning the ISIL fighters", although they made no reference to his numerous statements

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<sup>81</sup> 'Counter-Extremism Strategy', HM Government, October 2015.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> 'Revised Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales', HM Government, March 2015 (revised July 2016).

<sup>84</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>85</sup> 'SACRE Clerk, Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, Agenda and Minutes', Lewisham Council website, 22 September 2014, available at:

<http://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Cid=341&MID=3706#AI11028>, last visited: 14 February 2017, item 29.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

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in support of other forms of jihadism. Dinah Griffith would go on to give testimony on Shakeel Begg's behalf during his 2016 libel case against the BBC, during which she highlighted Imam Begg's "valuable" work with schools.<sup>91</sup> This might also raise the question of whether Begg's involvement with SACRE in any way assisted with facilitating the school visits in which he participated.

Lewisham Council did not provide comment on Shakeel Begg's involvement with SACRE or on whether or not the Council thought it appropriate that someone with extremist views should be advising the borough on the religious education provided in its schools.

A more recent sign of continuing engagement between Lewisham Council, Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre was the visit to the mosque by Lewisham deputy mayor Alan Smith on 26 December 2016.<sup>92</sup> Visits such as this may be considered concerning given the decision by the LIC to retain Imam Begg as both a trustee and Imam, even after the High Court judge's findings in October 2016.

Lewisham mayor's office declined to provide comment on the deputy mayor's December 2016 visit to Lewisham Islamic Centre.

### *3.5. NHS Trusts*

In its approach to counter-extremism, the government has expressed concerns about possible attempts at entryism within the NHS.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, the government's strategy for counter-extremism commits NHS Trusts to ensure that staff are appropriately trained to be able to identify instances of extremism and, in accordance with the Prevent duty, to use the available procedures to intervene where required.<sup>94</sup> These measures for the NHS exist as part of the government's wider commitment to ensure that public institutions do not "provide an uncontested space for extremist ideology to be propagated".<sup>95</sup>

Despite this, Shakeel Begg served for a number of years in a voluntary position as part of the chaplaincy at the local Lewisham hospital. Furthermore, the Trust's chaplain (now former chaplain), Reverend Malcolm Hancock, provided a testimonial in support of Imam Begg on the website of the Lewisham Islamic Centre, as well as during Begg's libel case against the BBC. In the Trust chaplain's testimonial for the Lewisham Islamic Centre, Reverend Hancock praised Imam Begg, saying, "Over the last three years Shakeel has been an invaluable source of information; somebody who I could go to for advice on Islamic issues."<sup>96</sup> Reverend Hancock also said, "We have developed very strong links with the Lewisham Islamic Centre and earlier this year Shakeel invited a group of us to come over to the Centre," and that he was "privileged to be associated with the Lewisham Islamic Centre".<sup>97</sup> In Reverend Hancock's endorsement of Shakeel Begg during the libel case, the court documents record him as testifying that he "could not imagine the Claimant inciting anyone to act in a way that would be considered irresponsible or a threat to the wider community".<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>92</sup> 'Great Community Unity at Lewisham Islamic Centre's Winter Events 2016', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 31 December 2016, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNews-Winter%20Events%20-2016-12-29.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>93</sup> 'Counter-Extremism Strategy', HM Government (October 2015).

<sup>94</sup> 'Revised Prevent Duty Guidance for England and Wales', HM Government, March 2015 (revised July 2016).

<sup>95</sup> 'Counter-Extremism Strategy', HM Government (October 2015).

<sup>96</sup> 'Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust Testimonial', Lewisham Islamic Centre website, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/plugindata/testimonials/Lewisham%20and%20Greenwich%20NHS%20Trust.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

In response to concerns on this matter, a spokesperson for Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust said that “former chaplain, Malcolm Hancock, who has since retired, worked with both the Lewisham Islamic Centre and Shakeel Begg, in this regard. The Trust recognises that his testimonial was given in good faith”.<sup>99</sup> Regarding Imam Begg’s position with the Trust’s chaplaincy, the spokesperson further noted, “On the basis of a high court judge’s findings, we will terminate his voluntary status with LGT.”<sup>100</sup> However, the spokesperson did not confirm whether the Trust or the chaplaincy had been aware of Begg’s extremist beliefs and statements prior to the October 2016 court ruling.

### *3.6. Charities, Civil Society and Faith Groups*

Charitable organisations and civil society groups are included as part of the government’s Counter-Extremism Strategy, and there are additional legal obligations for charities concerning tackling extremism. Indeed, the Counter-Extremism Strategy references that in the past trustees of charities have sometimes failed to act promptly in following policy guidelines to prevent the promotion of extremism and hateful material.<sup>101</sup> Under the Charity Commission’s compliance regulations, charity trustees are obligated to guard against the potential risks that may arise from extremist speakers and literature, including the potential glorification of terrorism and incitement of racial or religious hatred.<sup>102</sup>

The guidance provided by the Charity Commission for trustees emphasises that trustees must deal responsibly with concerns about their charity’s possible links with extremism by implementing effective procedures for assessing the risks posed by speakers at their events and by examining potential risks when engaging with other organisations.<sup>103</sup> The 2016 Protection of Charities and Social Investment Act has given the Charity Commission the additional power of being able to remove a trustee from a charity where their conduct would damage the public’s trust and confidence.<sup>104</sup>

While many faith groups and religious institutions also possess charitable status, the government’s October 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy additionally pledges to set out an approach specifically to confront the risk of extremism in places of worship. That document stresses that faith leaders have a vital role to play in standing up against extremism.<sup>105</sup> The strategy pledges that as part of efforts to ensure that faith groups are robust when facing challenges from extremism, the Department for Communities and Local Government will be creating a programme for assisting faith institutions to establish strong governance.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust, 11 January 2017.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> ‘Counter-Extremism Strategy’, HM Government (October 2015).

<sup>102</sup> ‘Compliance Toolkit: Protecting Charities from Harm, Chapter 5: Protecting charities from abuse for extremist purposes – summary’, Charity Commission for England and Wales, HM Government, January 2013, available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/572852/Chapter5\\_summary.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/572852/Chapter5_summary.pdf), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Counter-Extremism Strategy’, HM Government (October 2015).

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

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## EXTREMISM IN THE COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF SHAKEEL BEGG

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### 3.6.1. Citizens UK

Citizens UK is a registered charity which promotes itself as being primarily focused on local community organising and facilitating networks of faith, educational and voluntary groups.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, Citizens UK – and its earlier incarnation, London Citizens – has been involved in a number of campaign issues, including on wages, housing and refugees.<sup>108</sup> The organisation hosted leader’s election debates in 2010 and 2015, with a 2,500-strong audience attending the first of these.<sup>109</sup> David Cameron specifically praised Citizens UK for embodying his Big Society vision.<sup>110</sup> In 2015, Citizens UK was awarded £50,000 of public money by the Cabinet Office for the purpose of increasing voter registration among minority groups and young people.<sup>111</sup>

Citizens UK is now a sizable organisation that has grown to include multiple chapters across the country, with hundreds of constituent organisations, including schools, universities, local trade union branches, voluntary associations, churches, mosques and synagogues. The Lewisham Islamic Centre is a member of the South London chapter of Citizens UK,<sup>112</sup> and also states that it is a member of the London Citizens leadership team.<sup>113</sup> Over the years, Citizens UK appears to have collaborated with Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre on numerous occasions, such as in January 2014 when Citizens UK held a “listening exercise” event at the mosque.<sup>114</sup> In May 2014, Lewisham Islamic Centre participated in arranging an Accountability Assembly through Lewisham Citizens, part of the South London Citizens chapter of Citizens UK.<sup>115</sup> Shakeel Begg spoke at the public gathering where members of the community were able to question the local Police Borough Commander Russell Nyman, as well as mayoral candidates.<sup>116</sup>

In September 2015, Citizens UK launched its Commission on “Islam, Participation and Public Life”, chaired by the Conservative MP Dominic Grieve.<sup>117</sup> The organisation said it was launching the commission out of the concern that “Muslim leaders are retreating from public life, fearful of being tarnished as extremist simply for having faith, with groups who work with prominent Islamic institutions being pilloried for partnering with alleged extremists”.<sup>118</sup> As part of the Commission’s inquiries, Citizens UK announced that it would hold a number of hearings across the country, and in November Shakeel Begg reported that he had been one of

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<sup>107</sup> Citizens UK Charity, The Charity Commission, available at: <http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Showcharity/RegisterOfCharities/CharityWithPartB.aspx?RegisteredCharityNumber=1107264&SubsidiaryNumber=0>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>108</sup> National Campaigns, Citizens UK, available at: [http://www.citizensuk.org/national\\_campaigns](http://www.citizensuk.org/national_campaigns), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Citizens UK General Election Assembly 2010’, Citizens UK blog, 9 July 2010, available at: <http://www.citizensukblog.org/citizens-uk-general-election-assembly-2010/>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Citizens UK General Election Assembly 2010’, Citizens UK blog, 9 July 2010.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Citizens UK Awarded Funding for Voter Registration Action’, Citizens UK, 5 February 2015, available at:

[http://www.citizensuk.org/citizens\\_uk\\_awarded\\_funding\\_for\\_voter\\_registration\\_action](http://www.citizensuk.org/citizens_uk_awarded_funding_for_voter_registration_action), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>112</sup> ‘South London’, Citizens UK, available at: [http://www.citizensuk.org/south\\_london](http://www.citizensuk.org/south_london), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Lewisham Islamic Centre Politically Active in the Community’, Lewisham Islamic Centre, 28 April 2016, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNews-Lewisham%20Islamic%20Centre%20Politically%20Active%20in%20the%20Community-2016-04-28.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>114</sup> ‘London Citizens’ Listening Exercise at LIC’, Lewisham Islamic Centre, 12 January 2014, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/NL-14-01-12.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Great Turnout for the Accountability Assembly’, Lewisham Islamic Centre, 20 May 2014, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/NL-14-05-20.pdf>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> ‘Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation & Public Life’, Citizens UK, available at: [http://www.citizensuk.org/islam\\_public\\_life\\_commission](http://www.citizensuk.org/islam_public_life_commission), last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*

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those invited to speak before the Citizens UK commission regarding his opposition to the government's counter-radicalisation Prevent strategy.<sup>119</sup>

A further indication of Citizens UK's close relationship with Shakeel Begg was provided during the libel case itself when Peter Brierley, a lead organiser for South London Citizens, gave testimony on Begg's behalf, expressing his belief that Begg is not an extremist.<sup>120</sup> However, Citizens UK did not provide comment on the testimony given by their lead organiser from South London Citizens.

Particularly alarming is that Citizens UK has continued to work with Shakeel Begg even after the very public outcome of the extremism libel case, and in December 2016 the organisation provided Begg with one of his most prominent platforms to date. On 13 December 2016, Citizens UK held a vigil for child refugees outside Parliament, and Shakeel Begg was one of several official speakers. A number of religious figures chose to share a platform alongside Begg that evening, including Rabbi Janet Darley of Liberal Judaism and Mother Mae Christie of St Christopher's Church, South London, who introduced Begg before he spoke.<sup>121</sup> Still more concerning is that two prominent British politicians also joined Shakeel Begg at the vigil: Tim Farron, the leader of the Liberal Democrat party, who spoke directly after Begg, and Labour MP Stella Creasy, who spoke a little later at the same event.<sup>122</sup>

Tim Farron's office declined to give comment for this research on Mr Farron's decision to speak alongside Shakeel Begg just weeks after Justice Haddon-Cave's decision on Begg's extremism. Nor did the Liberal Democrat leader's office comment on whether Tim Farron would be speaking at Citizens UK events in the future, given the organisation's decision to associate with Begg. As such, it remains unclear precisely what Farron's position is when it comes to speaking alongside extremists such as Shakeel Begg. Equally, Stella Creasy declined to comment on her decision to speak at the same event as Begg.

Beyond its activities with Imam Shakeel Begg, there have been other concerns raised about Citizens UK and its complacency regarding extremism, and about those within the organisation accused of glorifying terrorism. In 2011, footage came to light of Junaid Ahmed, London Citizens' then deputy chair and trustee, giving an address in 2009 at the East London Mosque. In that speech, Ahmed glorified martyrdom and the proscribed terror group Hamas. During the talk, titled "Gaza: The Martyrs Meadow", Ahmed praised a number of Hamas leaders and referred to Ismail Haniyeh - Hamas' chief in Gaza - as "our leader".<sup>123</sup> During the same speech, Ahmed said, "Every single resistance fighter is an example for all of us to follow. And every child that dies, we wish our children would be in that similar position who would wake up and realise the aggression that is taking place amongst the believers."<sup>124</sup> At the time, concerns were also raised about Junaid Ahmed's position at the Islamic Forum of Europe, a group accused of promoting extremist attitudes<sup>125</sup> and strongly associated with the ideology of the Islamist group Jamaat-e-Islami.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> 'Empowerment through Faith Steadfastness and Truth/Imam Shakeel Begg/Citizens Not Subjects', YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sYDer5rutyU>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>120</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>121</sup> 'Public Action for Refugee Children Live from Westminster Action', Citizens UK Facebook page, livestreamed 13 December 2016, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/CitizensUK/videos/10153930289222096/>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> 'Junaid Ahmed, Hamas Heroes, and London Citizens', Harry's Place, 26 May 2011, available at: <http://hurryupharry.org/2011/05/26/junaid-ahmed-hamas-heroes-and-london-citizens/>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> 'IFE: not harmless democrats', *The Guardian*, 4 March 2010, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/mar/04/islamic-forum-europe-dispatches-gilligan>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Bowen, I., *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam*, 2014, p.98.

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Despite this evidence of extremism, Citizens UK dismissed the claim that any promotion of terrorism had taken place in Junaid Ahmed's 2009 East London Mosque talk. London Citizens' chair Paul O'Shea – who was also principle at St Charles Sixth Form College in Ladbroke Grove – stated that, having studied the footage, it was their opinion that their deputy chair “neither promotes or condones terrorism, nor expresses support for any proscribed organisation in what he said in that speech”.<sup>127</sup>

Citizens UK's founding executive director Neil Jameson has been similarly dismissive about concerns surrounding his charity's association with extremists. Following a 2010 Channel 4 investigative documentary into allegations of extremism at East London Mosque and the Islamic Forum of Europe, Jameson appeared on the Islam Channel where he told presenter John Rees, “We are proud of the East London Mosque. It was a founding member of the East London Communities Organisation in 1996, so I do speak with some authority and some relationship. We have been in relationship with the East London Mosque and more recently with Islamic Forum Europe.”<sup>128</sup> Jameson went on to say, “Our experience with both organisations is they are straightforward, sensible, excellent at developing and nurturing young people in proper behaviour in a democracy.”<sup>129</sup>

Citizens UK did not comment on its decision to invite Shakeel Begg to speak at its December 2016 vigil shortly after the decision in the High Court of Justice. Nor did it specifically express a position on the organisation's policy regarding extremist groups or individuals. However, a spokesperson for Citizens UK did state the following:

Citizens UK is the home of community organising in the UK. Our members are organisations and institutions (not individuals) working together for the public good. The Lewisham Islamic Centre has been an active member of South London Citizens chapter for several years, during which the Centre has played a positive role in community cohesion, and worked well with other local institutions on community projects.<sup>130</sup>

Regarding the South London Citizens chapter and its associations with the Lewisham Islamic Centre, the spokesperson commented:

South London Citizens' local leadership seeks to ensure that the activities and moral conduct of members uphold the shared principles of working together to create a better community for local people. These leaders continue to be able to work well with the Centre to create positive local change and coalesce around issues of mutual concern for the community – many hundreds of which use the mosque.<sup>131</sup>

### *3.6.2. Stand Up to Racism*

Stand Up to Racism is a British campaign group with chapters across the United Kingdom. The group has won the support of Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn and trade unions, and is currently working in

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<sup>127</sup> ‘London Citizens stand by Islamist hardliner’, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 26 May 2011, available at: <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/london-citizens-stand-by-islamist-hardliner-1.23338>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Neil Jameson of London Citizens on the East London Mosque and the IFE – part 1’, YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFO5nCSoVDs>, last visited: 14 February 2017.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Citizens UK, 2 February 2017.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

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collaboration with the Trade Union Congress.<sup>132</sup> Stand Up to Racism's President is Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott. Its Co-chair is Talha Ahmad,<sup>133</sup> who is also treasurer and spokesperson for the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), an organisation that in 2009 the then Labour government suspended links with over concerns about extremist views within the MCB.<sup>134</sup> Stand Up To Racism includes among its Vice-chairs the Labour Shadow Cabinet MP Kate Osamor, Labour MEP Claude Moraes, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers Christine Blower, and Rabbi Lee Wax.<sup>135</sup> Several of those with senior positions in Stand Up to Racism were also listed in the leadership of the controversial group Unite Against Fascism.

More recently, Stand Up to Racism has increasingly spoken out against counter-extremism policies. However, it has been doing so in collaboration with individuals who have been described as extremist. In October 2016, the Stand Up to Racism national conference featured a session on the government's counter-radicalisation Prevent strategy, at which Moazzam Begg spoke on behalf of CAGE, a campaign group which has been described "pro-terrorist" and which in February 2015 caused outcry when CAGE's Asim Qureshi described Islamic State executioner Mohammed Emwazi as a "beautiful young man".<sup>136</sup> In January of 2017, Stand Up to Racism and the campaign group MEND released a joint report opposing the government's Prevent strategy.<sup>137</sup> Among the pamphlet's contributors is MEND's Azad Ali, a figure who has on numerous occasions been accused of promoting extremist views and of praising extremist figures,<sup>138</sup> and who in 2010 lost a libel case against the *Daily Mail* in which the judge determined that Ali had previously taken the position that the killing of British and American troops in Iraq was justified.<sup>139</sup>

Over the years, Stand Up to Racism has collaborated with Imam Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre on a number of occasions. In March 2016, Stand Up to Racism and the Lewisham Anti-Racism Action Group - a founding signatory of Stand Up to Racism in 2014<sup>140</sup> - held a panel on refugees featuring Begg at Goldsmiths University. The panel also included Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild of Tzelem, Denis Fernando of Stand Up to Racism, and Labour MP Vicky Foxcroft of Lewisham and Deptford.<sup>141</sup> Vicky Foxcroft had also sat alongside Begg at a Goldsmiths panel event organised by the Lewisham Anti-Racism Action Group in February 2015.<sup>142</sup> Vicky Foxcroft's office did not provide comment on her decision to speak alongside Begg in March 2016 and February 2015.

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<sup>132</sup> 'Stand Up To Racism Trade Union Conference', TUC, available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/events/stand-racism-trade-union-conference>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>133</sup> 'About', Stand Up To Racism, available at: <http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk/about/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>134</sup> 'Government Suspends Links with Muslim Council of Britain over Gaza', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2009, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/mar/23/muslim-council-britain-gaza>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>135</sup> 'About', Stand Up To Racism.

<sup>136</sup> 'IS "Jihadi John" suspect "a beautiful young man" - Cage', *BBC News*, 26 February 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31650427>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>137</sup> "'Prevent: Why We Should Dissent' - New Resource Launched by Stand Up To Racism and MEND", Stand Up To Racism website, 3 January 2017, available at: <http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk/prevent-dissent-new-resource-launched-stand-racism-mend/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>138</sup> 'Azad Ali, Awlaki Fan, Opponent of Democracy: Now Vice Chair of Unite Against Fascism', Harry's Place, 28 February 2012, available at:

<http://hurryupharry.org/2012/02/28/azad-ali-awlaki-fan-opponent-of-democracy-now-vice-chair-of-unite-against-fascism/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>139</sup> *Ali v Associated Newspapers Ltd* [2010] EWHC 100 (QB), 27 January 2010, available at: <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2010/100.html>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>140</sup> 'Founding Statement and Supporters', Stand Up to Racism, available at: <http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk/founding-statement-and-supporters/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>141</sup> 'Refugees Welcome Here, No to Islamophobia - Public Meeting', Stand Up to Racism Facebook page, 1 March 2016, available at: [https://www.facebook.com/events/520540198124537/?active\\_tab=about](https://www.facebook.com/events/520540198124537/?active_tab=about), last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>142</sup> 'Stand Up To Racism and Islamophobia', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 25 February 2015, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/NL-2015-02-25.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

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Imam Begg is understood to have had a role as a Muslim chaplain at Goldsmiths between 2004 and 2006. However, a spokesperson for Goldsmiths University said, “Shakeel Begg may have visited the campus in an informal capacity many years ago in his role as Imam at the local Lewisham and Kent Islamic Centre – but he has never been formally employed or contracted by Goldsmiths.”<sup>143</sup> Goldsmiths subsequently clarified that Begg’s role with the university’s chaplaincy had been a voluntary one.<sup>144</sup>

Once again, it would appear that even after the court judgement on Shakeel Begg’s extremism in October 2016, Stand Up to Racism is another group that has continued to collaborate with him regardless. On 15 December 2016, the South East London branch of Stand Up to Racism held a vigil against Islamophobia, with Shakeel Begg as one of the invited speakers. Speaking alongside Begg at the event were a number of Stand Up to Racism activists: Father Bates from St Hilda’s and St Cyprian’s Church, and Gurbakhsh Garcha former Lewisham mayor and member of Lewisham’s SACRE interfaith committee.<sup>145</sup>

No comment was received from Stand Up to Racism regarding the organisation’s relationship with Shakeel Begg.

### *3.6.3 Unite Against Fascism*

Unite Against Fascism (UAF) is a campaign group that was established in 2003 with a number of senior political figures acting as founding signatories, including David Cameron, Dianne Abbott, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone<sup>146</sup> – who is listed as an honorary president – and claims Peter Hain as its Parliamentary Officer.<sup>147</sup> Unite Against Fascism also lists a number of prominent trade unions among its supporting organisations, such as the National Union of Teachers, Unison, Unite, the University and College Union and the National Union of Journalists.<sup>148</sup>

It is particularly noticeable that over the years Unite Against Fascism and Stand Up to Racism have been linked by a number of key individuals. For instance, UAF founder and joint secretary Weyman Bennett is also listed as a co-convenor for Stand Up to Racism.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Sabby Dhalu is listed as a joint secretary for Unite Against Fascism<sup>150</sup> and as a co-convenor for Stand Up to Racism.<sup>151</sup> Steve Hart was listed on the UAF website as the organisation’s Chair,<sup>152</sup> and he is also a Vice-chair at Stand Up to Racism.<sup>153</sup> Christine Blower has been listed as both a Vice-chair for Unite Against Fascism<sup>154</sup> and a Vice-chair for Stand Up to Racism.<sup>155</sup> Claude Morales is given as European Officer for UAF<sup>156</sup> and as a Vice-chair for Stand Up to Racism.<sup>157</sup> Azad

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Goldsmiths University of London, 18 January 2017.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Goldsmiths University of London, 31 January 2017.

<sup>145</sup> ‘Lewisham Anti-Racist Action Group’, Stand Up to Racism website, available at: <http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk/larag/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>146</sup> ‘Founding Signatories’, Unite Against Fascism, available at: <http://uaf.org.uk/about/founding-signatories/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Our Officers’, Unite Against Fascism, available at: <http://uaf.org.uk/about/our-officers/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>148</sup> ‘Our Supporting Organisations’, Unite Against Fascism, available at: <http://uaf.org.uk/about/our-supporting-organisations/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>149</sup> ‘About’, Stand Up to Racism.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Our Officers’, Unite Against Fascism.

<sup>151</sup> ‘About’, Stand Up to Racism.

<sup>152</sup> ‘Our Officers’, Unite Against Fascism.

<sup>153</sup> ‘About’, Stand Up to Racism.

<sup>154</sup> ‘Our Officers’, Unite Against Fascism.

<sup>155</sup> ‘About’, Stand Up to Racism.

<sup>156</sup> ‘Our Officers’, Unite Against Fascism.

<sup>157</sup> ‘About’, Stand Up to Racism.



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Ali of the Islamic Forum of Europe appears as a Vice-chair for UAF<sup>158</sup> and, through his position as director of engagement at MEND, has also collaborated with Stand Up to Racism on creating the organisation's anti-Prevent document as well as being a speaker at the organisation's national conference in 2016.<sup>159</sup> Equally, Talha Ahmad, who is a Co-chair at Stand Up to Racism, has also been a speaker for Unite Against Fascism, having addressed the group's national conference in 2014.<sup>160</sup>

There has previously been some controversy surrounding Unite Against Fascism. In addition to the organisation's association with speakers who promote extremist views, particular concerns have been raised about the number of violent clashes that UAF supporters have been involved with during demonstrations. Often these clashes have occurred during confrontations with BNP and EDL members, but also with the police, including an incident in October 2009 outside the BBC's *Question Time* programme during which three police officers were injured.<sup>161</sup> In 2014 there were accusations that UAF supporters had been using aggression and intimidation against the leader of the UK Independence Party.<sup>162</sup>

Unite Against Fascism has been criticised for some of the figures it has hosted as speakers. Indeed, UAF has provided Shakeel Begg with a public platform on a number of occasions. A planned Unite Against Fascism rally for 1 June 2013 in Woolwich where Lee Rigby had been murdered days earlier by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale – two worshippers at Lewisham Islamic Centre – had advertised Begg as one of the confirmed speakers.<sup>163</sup> However, the gathering was moved to Westminster for the purpose of counter demonstrating the BNP. During violent clashes that day involving BNP supporters, anti-Fascist demonstrators and police, some 58 arrests were made.<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, Shakeel Begg was still able to address a UAF gathering on 3 June that year when he spoke on a panel organised by the group at the University of London Union. Those joining Begg on the panel included Labour's Jeremy Corbyn, Talha Ahmed of the MCB, UAF founder Weyman Bennett, and social activist Jude Woodward.<sup>165</sup>

Unite Against Fascism did not provide a comment on the group's past associations with Shakeel Begg.

### 3.6.4 Faith Groups

As was made clear during the libel case against the BBC, Shakeel Begg's interfaith work has been extensive. This has particularly been highlighted through the Imam's position on the Lewisham SACRE committee, school visits, which have included a number of faith schools, and Begg's associations with groups such as

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<sup>158</sup> 'Our Officers', Unite Against Fascism.

<sup>159</sup> 'Birth of a movement - voices of resistance from the Stand Up To Racism conference', Socialist Worker, 11 October 2016, available at: <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/43511/Birth+of+a+movement+voices+of+resistance+from+the+Stand+Up+To+Racism+conference>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>160</sup> 'Talha Ahmad at UAF Conference 2014', YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAZfXc0XAeM>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>161</sup> 'Angry Scenes face Griffin at BBC', BBC News, 22 October 2009, available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/8321157.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8321157.stm), last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>162</sup> 'Unite Against Fascism vs UKIP (12May14)', YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Rm7NmIsjsk>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>163</sup> 'Len Duvall Confirms for Woolwich Demo', Unite Against Fascism, 30 May 2013, available at: <http://uaf.org.uk/2013/05/len-duvall-confirms-for-woolwich-demo/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>164</sup> '58 arrested as anti-fascist demonstrators clash with BNP in Westminster', *Evening Standard*, 1 June 2013, available at: <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/58-arrested-as-anti-fascist-demonstrators-clash-with-bnp-in-westminster-8640650.html>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>165</sup> 'Unite Against Fascism - videos', YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/UAFvideos/videos>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

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Citizens UK, which bring together religious leaders from a broad range of different faiths. Both the Lewisham Islamic Centre and its Imam have played a prominent part in local interfaith activities, such as Lewisham's annual Peace Walk. These are precisely the kinds of activities that have provided Shakeel Begg with the standing and respectability referenced by Justice Haddon-Cave. Clearly, Begg and his organisation are conscious of the public relations advantages that interfaith work can offer, particularly when seeking to counter charges pertaining to radicalisation. In September 2014, the Lewisham Islamic Centre promoted news of an interfaith sporting match in which Begg and members of the mosque had participated, with the headline, "Extremism at the Lewisham Islamic Centre?"<sup>166</sup>

Furthermore, out of the interfaith network within which Shakeel Begg has established himself, a number of faith leaders stepped forward to provide testimony on Begg's behalf as part of his court case against the BBC. Begg and the Lewisham Islamic Centre had established a number of connections with Catford and Bromley Synagogue, as well as with the synagogue's cantor and reverend, David Rome. In February 2014, Catford and Bromley Synagogue hosted an interfaith event – with David Rome and Shakeel Begg both in attendance – on the place of women in religion,<sup>167</sup> and in October 2015, Begg and members of the LIC attended an event at the synagogue on faith in the media.<sup>168</sup> The website of the Lewisham Islamic Centre promotes a testimonial from Reverend David Rome and the Trustees of Catford and Bromley Synagogue, which reads, "Catford & Bromley Synagogue is delighted to be associated with Imam Shakeel and the Lewisham Islamic Centre. Our joint events have portrayed the warmth and friendship between our two communities."<sup>169</sup>

Both Reverend David Rome and Gerald Rose of Catford and Bromley Synagogue provided testimony on behalf of Imam Begg during his court case against the BBC.<sup>170</sup> In light of Begg's statements and associations, the role of a Jewish institution in acting to defend him from charges of extremism might be thought to be particularly concerning. In his 2006 address at the University of Kingston, Begg had said, "Take some money and go to Palestine and fight, fight the terrorists, fight the Zionists in Palestine if you want to do this."<sup>171</sup> Similarly, in his 2009 Deviant Groups speech, Begg had referenced a passage by Sheikh bin Baz on "fighting the Jews in an Islamic Jihad".<sup>172</sup> During the libel case, Justice Haddon-Cave observed Begg's response as "chilling" when, in the course of his cross-examination on the speech, Begg claimed in his defence that the passage did not "mean every Zionist should be killed".<sup>173</sup> It should also be noted that Lewisham Islamic Centre has hosted numerous anti-Semitic hate preachers, including Abdullah Hakim Quick, Murtaza Kahn, Sheikh Haitham Al-Haddad and Uthman Lateef.<sup>174</sup>

Despite all these concerns, Catford and Bromley Synagogue declined to give comment on the relationship the community maintains with Shakeel Begg and Lewisham Islamic Centre, or to comment on the testimony given on Begg's behalf by Reverend David Rome in the High Court of Justice.

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<sup>166</sup> 'Extremism at Lewisham Islamic Centre?', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 3 September 2013, available at:

<http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/NL-14-09-02.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>167</sup> 'Allah Skal Med', Norsk Riskring Kasting, 16 February 2014, available at: [https://www.nrk.no/urix/alla\\_h\\_-\\_skal-med-1.11548282](https://www.nrk.no/urix/alla_h_-_skal-med-1.11548282), last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>168</sup> 'Faith in the Media', Lewisham Islamic Centre, 21 October 2015, available at:

<http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNews-FaithInTheMedia-2015-10-21.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>169</sup> 'Catford & Bromley Synagogue - Testimonial', Lewisham Islamic Centre, available at:

<http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/downloads/upload/13-12-21%20Catford%20and%20Bromley%20Synagogue.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>170</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*

Another faith leader in the Lewisham community with whom Begg has established an association is Father Charles Pickstone of St Laurence Church, Catford. The two faith leaders attended local interfaith community events,<sup>175</sup> and Imam Begg had previously been a guest speaker at St Laurence Church.<sup>176</sup> Equally, Father Pickstone has spoken at Lewisham Islamic Centre, such as on 19 June 2016 when he spoke alongside Imam Begg and Gerald Rose of Catford and Bromley Synagogue.<sup>177</sup> The Lewisham Islamic Centre website features a testimonial by Father Pickstone in which he describes having had the “privilege” of working alongside Shakeel Begg, who he describes in the testimonial as a “true man of peace”.<sup>178</sup> Father Pickstone also expresses his belief that the Lewisham Islamic Centre is a “force for good for all the people of Lewisham Borough”.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, Father Pickstone was among those who provided testimony for Begg during the libel case and is recorded as having told the court “that to the best of his knowledge the Claimant adhered to and taught to others a moral code that seems entirely ‘unimpeachable’”.<sup>180</sup>

Father Charles Pickstone declined to comment on whether or not he had been aware of the nature of Begg’s extremist views or the extremist speakers invited to Lewisham Islamic Centre at the time when he spoke alongside Begg at the mosque in June 2016. Father Pickstone also declined to confirm whether he had familiarised himself with Begg’s extremist statements prior to the testimony he gave in the High Court of Justice.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

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One of the primary challenges in the struggle against violent extremism must be to prevent the legitimisation and mainstreaming of nonviolent extremism. The case of Shakeel Begg and the Lewisham community provides a clear example of how someone with a long record of promoting extreme views was able to establish himself at the heart of community activities. In particular, Begg was able to take advantage of interfaith groups and activities to create a profile as an accepted and prominent figure in the local community. Equally, the eagerness of police and local authorities to ensure that they were engaging with faith groups who might otherwise have felt marginalised provided Shakeel Begg with an opportunity to place himself at the forefront of this work. This led to such concerning anomalies as Begg – himself an extremist – advising Lewisham Council’s SACRE committee on how to approach the issue of extremism in schools.<sup>181</sup>

What is so striking is that from within the many community groups and public bodies there appears to have been almost no effort to challenge or counter Shakeel Begg, either for his extremism or for his efforts to place himself at the heart of community life in the borough. Concerned individuals and campaigners beyond Lewisham did seek to raise the alarm, and Begg’s extremism even received coverage in prominent national

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<sup>175</sup> ‘Lewisham Islamic Centre Wins The Interfaith Cricket Match’, *London Local*, 23 April 2016, available at: <http://se1gym.co.uk/lewisham-islamic-center/>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>176</sup> ‘St Laurence’s Church, Catford – Testimonial’, Lewisham Islamic Centre, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/plugindata/testimonials/St%20Laurence%20Church%20Catford.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>177</sup> ‘The Annual Community Iftar at Lewisham Islamic Centre’, Lewisham Islamic Centre, 19 June 2016, available at: <http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/documents/latestevent/LICNews-LIC%20Annual%20Community%20Iftar-2016-06-19.pdf>, last visited: 16 February 2017.

<sup>178</sup> ‘St Laurence’s Church, Catford – Testimonial’, Lewisham Islamic Centre.

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Begg v British Broadcasting Corporation* [2016] EWHC 2688 (QB), 28 October 2016.

<sup>181</sup> ‘SACRE Clerk, Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, Agenda and Minutes’, Lewisham Council website, 22 September 2014.

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media outlets such as the *Sunday Times* and the BBC. Yet those in Lewisham working with Begg either failed to undertake even the most preliminary research into his background or otherwise chose to ignore the evidence easily available to anyone undertaking an internet search. The result of this failing was that numerous local schools chose to engage with Imam Begg, with several openly promoting their relationship with him. One even cited the school's links with Shakeel Begg as an example of how the school was delivering on promoting British values of tolerance and democracy.<sup>182</sup> Such an instance would suggest that within our public bodies there remains a serious lack of understanding about the nature and dangers of nonviolent extremism.

Eventually, when Begg pursued a libel case against the BBC for describing him as an extremist, a long list of local community figures – including a police Chief Inspector – rallied to give testimony on his behalf in the High Court of Justice. These individuals all referenced their own first-hand experience of Begg's work in the community, and several stated that they had never witnessed Shakeel Begg express extremist sentiments.

Justice Haddon-Cave found in favour of the BBC and dismissed Begg's claim on the grounds that Shakeel Begg is indeed an extremist speaker. Yet even after this highly publicised decision in the High Court, prominent groups and mainstream political figures have not desisted from associating with him. These have included Liberal Democrat party leader Tim Farron and prominent Labour MP Stella Creasy, who both spoke at the same Citizens UK event in Westminster as Begg, and Lewisham's deputy mayor Alan Smith, who spoke at the LIC in December 2016, despite the mosque's continued backing of Begg.

Where public bodies are concerned, statutory guidance does now exist which aims to ensure that Britain's public services cannot become uncontested spaces for the promotion of extremism. The government's Counter-Extremism Strategy in particular recognises the importance of public bodies not legitimising extremists by collaborating with them. It must be acknowledged that the Prevent duty is still relatively new: the guidance having first been published in March 2015, it only became statutory in July 2015. Nevertheless, the Lewisham case would appear to indicate some early difficulties with implementation, and this is despite government efforts to engage public bodies in earlier incarnations of Prevent that long predate 2015. As outlined in Prevent, it is important that educational institutions draw up a rigorous speaker policy for ensuring that the pupils in their care are not exposed to external speakers who promote extremism. From the examples featured in this research, it may be that there are two primary areas for public institutions to work on: to improve understanding of how to identify extremism and to establish better practice for researching potential external speakers and partner organisations.

As the Prevent duty continues to be reviewed and developed in practice, it may be that instances arise where local Prevent officers will need to be more proactive in reaching out to institutions that are struggling to meet their commitments under the statutory duty. If occasions do arise where a public body is consistently, and perhaps even wilfully, neglecting to meet its obligations, it is important that relevant repercussions exist as an option. This is already the case for schools, which risk being downgraded in their Ofsted review should there be serious concerns about extremism at the school.

While keeping extremism out of our public institutions is a matter for the government to confront through the development of existing counter-extremism programmes, the Shakeel Begg case highlights how responsible civil society groups and faith communities also need to be concerned about the risks of working with – and legitimising – those who seek to promote extremism. Some of these groups will have charitable status, in which case associations with extremists can become a serious matter to be taken up for investigation by the Charity Commission. Groups that enjoy charitable status are expected to implement effective

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<sup>182</sup> 'British Values Statement', Saint John Baptist (Southend) Primary School website, October 2016.

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governance procedures for assessing the risks posed by external speakers and to investigate potential risks when engaging with other organisations.

The Shakeel Begg case has also touched upon large national umbrella organisations with local chapters and constituent member groups, such as Citizens UK and Stand Up to Racism, as well as churches and synagogues that exist as part of larger denominations, such as the Church of England and the United Synagogue. When it comes to challenging extremism at the local level, the question must also be raised about what responsibility the leaderships of such groups have to provide support and guidance for communities that may be confronting these challenges on the ground. Larger civil society groups and religious umbrella bodies may wish to consider issuing policy guidance for local leaders, clergy, congregations and local branches on how to avoid collaborating with extremists and the risks of entryism. These groups may also want to explore the possibility of putting in place formalised procedures by which congregants and members could raise concerns in the event that they believe their place of worship or local chapter was associating with extremists. At times, members may need channels by which to raise concerns with those higher up, if they fear the local leadership is not fully cognisant of an extremism-related risk.

Extremism, in all of its forms, continues to pose a very real threat to public welfare and to the liberal and democratic values of British society. As such, it is vitally important that extremism is systematically confronted wherever it seeks to manifest itself. In particular, there must be an emphasis on preventing extremism in the public sphere, to ensure that extremists are never left unchallenged or publicly legitimised. The case from Lewisham provides a concerning example of where things can start to go wrong and of how – through complacency – public institutions and civil society can unwittingly be recruited for advancing extremists.

### About the Author

Tom Wilson is a Research Fellow at the Centre for the New Middle East at The Henry Jackson Society. Prior to joining The Henry Jackson Society, he worked as a Tikvah Fellow at Commentary Magazine, where he wrote about political extremism and terrorism in the Middle East. Tom attended Royal Holloway University and UCL, where he obtained a BA and an MA in Modern History. His writing has been published in The Wall Street Journal, Commentary Magazine, Standpoint, Real Clear Politics, The Jerusalem Post and other outlets.



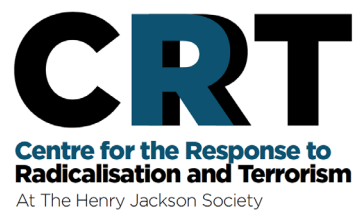
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The Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism (CRT) at The Henry Jackson Society provides top-quality, in-depth research and delivers targeted, tangible and impactful activities to combat the threats from radical ideologies and terrorism at home and abroad.



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The Henry Jackson Society  
Millbank Tower,  
21-24 Millbank, London, SW1P 4QP  
Tel: 020 7340 4520

[www.henryjacksonsociety.org](http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org)  
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