



Birmingham Citizens

The West Midlands is one of the homes of UK community organising; Black Country Citizens was the one of the country's first ever organising groups. It evolved into the West Midlands Youth Organising Project (WMYOP), which then became Young Citizens.

In 2005 Birmingham Citizens was created, with Young Citizens as its youth wing. Now it is an organisation of 43 institutions, including schools, mosques, trade unions, universities, churches and other non-profit organisations.

Birmingham City Council have recognised Birmingham Citizens as the largest, most diverse community organising alliance in the West Midlands.

Since 2008, Birmingham Citizens has been based at the Nishkam Centre, a community development hub attached to the large Sikh Gurdwara on bustling Soho Road, in Handsworth, near the city centre. The first ever meeting held in the Nishkam Centre was a Birmingham Citizens' Annual General Meeting.

Birmingham Citizens' aim is to enable community institutions to work effectively on the pressures that face families and neighbourhoods, and to bring together the mixed communities of Birmingham.

By identifying key power players in the city, researching issues and preparing and training leaders, they build partnerships with key officials to create stronger and more stable communities.

Since Birmingham Citizens was first established, they have held annual community conventions, bringing together over a thousand people every year from across the city, including local politicians, religious and trade union leaders, and police.

Birmingham Citizens launched the European Governance Campaign in the West Midlands, involving over 10,000 people across the region in a discussion around neighbourhood regeneration.

Training has included the development of a resource on 'active citizenship' for young people, used in schools. Working with police, Birmingham Citizens won a commitment to pilot an awareness training programme to bridge the relationship between the Muslim community and police.



The Soho Road Gurdwara, one of the largest Sikh temples in Britain, includes the Nishkam Centre, Birmingham Citizen's office

During the disturbances of 2005 and 2011, Birmingham Citizens organised faith and community leaders throughout the affected areas of Lozells and Handsworth to call for reconciliation. Following the violence, they continued to work to address the underlying issues.

Their Young Citizens arm thrives; and regular iCircle meetings work with dozens of young people to support integration and tackle extremism.

BIRMINGHAM CITIZENS

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iCircle Youth Group

“I want my children to live in a multicultural, tolerant society, in which people of various religions and faiths get on and look at what unites, rather than divides them.”

The weekly iCircle meetings work like a youth club. But as well enjoying sport and art, the young Muslims who attend are taught how to challenge perceptions, tackle prejudice and encourage integration.

Across Birmingham, many of the city's estimated 150,000 Muslims live in very self-contained communities; some schools have up to 95 per cent Muslim students.

By breaking down the barriers between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the iCircle aims to promote cohesion.

Young people participate in wide-ranging discussions about every aspect of their faith, including relationships, dress, work, and socialising.

By encouraging young people to be outward-looking and embrace multiculturalism, iCircle hopes to encourage them to reject extremism and segregation.

There are about five iCircles held across Birmingham every week, for around 200 boys and girls. In addition, iCircle runs longer residential outdoor trips.

The iCircle is run by around 15 leaders. The group is always looking for more volunteers.

“By getting integration out there, we are able to talk to people who are not Muslim, and say, we are not really that alien. We are not into all of this so-called jihad you see on the TV.”



NADIM TAHIR, PIONEER, THE ICIRCLE

Entrepreneur Nadim Tahir, 34, first became involved with the work of Birmingham Citizens in 2010 when organising a charity fundraiser for the victims of the Haiti earthquake disaster.

Yet when members of the city's Muslim community questioned why he was helping non-Muslims, he was shocked. Determined to improve integration amongst the city's young Muslims, he decided to help create the iCircle.

“Young Muslims were just not making the effort to become integrated into society. You'll find, around Birmingham especially, that these kind of kids don't have any access to people who are not of the same faith or background.

“When I first started to work with the Birmingham Citizens, I was asked to help organise a charity dinner for the people of Haiti.

“But when we came across certain people in the community who said, ‘Hold on, they're not actually Muslim’, for me, it was a wake-up call. I realised that a lot of people in our community don't understand that they have a duty towards human beings



Nadim with an iCircle group

“We have a tradition in which we have to look after our neighbours forty doors to the right, or forty doors to the left. Regardless what their religion or background is.”

whether they're Muslim or not. So that was one of the reasons we set up the iCircle.

“We have a tradition in which we have to look after our neighbours forty doors to the right, or forty doors to the left. Regardless what their religion or background is.

“I want my children to live in a multicultural, tolerant society, one in which people of various religions and faiths get on and look at what unites, rather than divides them.

“You can break down any community into what separates them; religion, eye colour, skin colour, it goes on and on. But we're all humans and we just want to get on. That really is the motivation behind it.

“Birmingham has had a few problems with people like the EDL (English Defence League). Perhaps they've had a bad experience with people from Muslim communities. I feel that's one of the reasons why people like the EDL are prevalent; because people don't know what Muslims are actually about.

“By getting integration out there, we are able to talk to people who are not Muslim, and say, we are not really that alien. We are not into all of this so-called jihad you see on the TV.

“There are very gradual developments; a lot of the kids will attend the iCircle to socialise and see their friends. But if we only hit one of two per cent of them, then obviously there is a knock-on effect to all the kids that they know, and the next generation.

“I do see that difference, and it's very, very positive.” ●



SAJIDA MADNI, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BIRMINGHAM CITIZENS

Sajida Madni, 32, has been an organiser with Birmingham Citizens since 2005. She describes what community organising means to her.

“I always give the analogy of football when I’m describing community organising. If you have teams A and B playing on the field, and team C is spectating, rarely do the players on the field on either team go up to team C and say, “You guys have been watching me for years and years – is there anything I can do to improve my game?” They’ll just sign an autograph and that’s about it.

“In real life, on the field the two teams making all the decisions about the things that impact our (Team C’s) life are the government and corporations. Rarely do they consult us in anything. My job as a community organiser is to get team C on the field permanently; not just as spectators, but to get involved in the decisions that impact our lives.

“Community organising is civic engagement. It’s getting us to take power, because power is never given, it’s taken. Get involved, and influence the decisions that are made about our lives. That’s community organising.

“It was when I went to a Leadership training provided by Birmingham Citizens that I decided I wanted to be a community organiser. It was unlike anything. It was very practical, it gave me real tools to go out there in the real world and enable the community around me to help make positive change in our neighbourhood.

“Diversity is our biggest strength. Birmingham Citizens differs in a way; a lot of community organisers would say, let’s just forget about our differences, and let’s work together. But I didn’t think that was very fair; so I said, let’s talk about our

differences. Because when we’ve passed that hurdle and accepted each other for who we actually are, that’s when the real work can begin.

“At Birmingham Citizens, people are very comfortable with each other. The relationships have deepened over the years. We held a summer school about the difficult issues we usually brush under the carpet. We were able to be honest and frank with one another and it was all done respectfully.

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“City council leaders will come to our events because they know that we’re not just representing one particular community, we’re representing tens of thousands of people from different communities. We have the faith leaders of Birmingham on board, and they’re a powerful group. People in Birmingham are proud to belong to faith groups and are proud citizens of a city that goes beyond tolerance. I think it’s something that gives Birmingham Citizens immense strength.

“We can have real raw conversations and real relationships and do real work knowing that we’ve got these differences; but we all want the same things. There isn’t anybody in Birmingham Citizens that can’t communicate or empathise with any one community out there that needs our help. The work is easier because of the relational power we have built. There’s always much more to be done together.” ●