

“Charity in the Islamic faith is much more than giving money”

In 2020, Kashif Shabir set Muslim Aid UK on an ambitious transformation journey. The interim chief executive talks to Emily Burt about reimagining the charity’s purpose

Portraits by Colin Stout

When Kashif Shabir began consulting on a major transformation programme at Muslim Aid UK, it was “in absence of understanding the depths of its problems” – and with no idea he would soon become a director of the charity, and within a year take the helm as its interim chief executive.

Despite harbouring some reservations about the organisation at the time, he felt a sense of responsibility that compelled him to take on the challenge. “There is no doubt the charity was an institution of our community,” he says.

This is far more than a figure of speech for Shabir, who was born and raised in London’s East End. His father and uncle ran a family business just off Brick Lane – and Muslim Aid’s headquarters were built right across the street.

“We used to walk down to the factory every day,” he remembers. “My mum would go down

there, after picking us up from school, to help my dad out – on foot between Brick Lane and Whitechapel, past the East London Mosque, we walked past that office space.”

Yet it would be many years, and a very roundabout career path, before Shabir stepped through the doors of the charity. After leaving school he studied computer science at Kings College London, before spending his early career working as a programmer at the rapidly expanding telecommunications company Nokia. The organisation was the second-biggest mobile phone manufacturer in the world; when Shabir applied for a job at a networking start-up in Mountainview, he was several emails into the process before he realised the role was based in Silicon Valley.

“I thought: California? I can’t go to America. It was the other side of the world, and until that point no one in our family had even moved out

to go to university,” he says. “The only time you left the family home was when you got married or were thrown out for doing something stupid.”

But the opportunity was too good for him to pass up. In a bid to reassure his family, Shabir said he would only go for a year, to gain valuable experience. He ended up staying for 14 years: getting married, having his first two children, and going out of his way to explore the cultural melting pot of the Golden State.

By the time the family relocated back to London, Shabir had travelled the world with the company, visiting Canada, Singapore, Australia and Europe – and volunteering or working pro bono for charities throughout.

“I had been exposed to these different ways of working, and during this time I was always volunteering, in the US and in the UK,” he says.

“There seemed a really big gap in the skill sets and the knowledge that the commercial sector and the charity sector benefited from, when it came to developing different strategies and working together on process, vision and mission statements.”

He decided to harness his expertise from working with a global corporation to help charities to bridge these gaps, first on a pro bono basis, then setting up his own consultancy, with the help of a grant from former employer Nokia, in 2012. He went from working with small and local faith-based charities to driving change at larger organisations including Oxfam,





where he spent almost two years as head of knowledge management and learning, and British Red Cross, where he worked on a digital transformation programme.

Director of transformation

So when Shabir found himself advising on a transformation strategy for Muslim Aid at the end of 2019, it was with eight years of strategic sector consulting under his belt.

He moved on from the project while the charity's board was waiting to implement his recommendations; but within months, Muslim Aid had opened a position for director of

transformation and reached out to see whether he would be interested in applying for the role and implementing the work he had laid the foundations for.

It was when Shabir came to interview (with, he says, no real intention of taking the job) that the extent of the problems at the charity became clear to him.

"The charity was still working on a Charity Commission action plan that was put in place in 2018. It had a financial deficit that had been built over the last 10 years, and a number of whistleblowing reports then came out against the chief executive," Shabir explains.

CV

- » **2020-present** Director of transformation and strategy, and interim chief executive, Muslim Aid UK
- » **2012-2020** Managing director and principle consultant, Ethical Consultancy Group, providing training and strategic consulting to the voluntary and not-for-profit sector
- » **2017-2020** General manager, Euro Charity Trust
- » **2016-2017** Programme manager, strategic change and digital transformation, British Red Cross
- » **2014-2016** Knowledge management and learning manager, programme strategy and impact, British Red Cross
- » **2012-2014** General Manager, Mercy Mission
- » **1997-2012** Roles including software architect, programme manager and business planning and development manager, Nokia

In February 2020, the charity announced it had launched an independent investigation after a letter, reportedly signed by more than 40 members of staff, was sent to the Charity Commission expressing no confidence in the charity's chief executive, Jehangir Malik.

It was not the most auspicious of beginnings – but nonetheless, Shabir took the job.

"When I joined, the culture was shot," he says. "There had been a massive loss of trust between the staff and the senior leadership team, and with the board, for a whole host of reasons."

Within two months of Shabir taking on the director of transformation role, it was announced that Malik would step down after almost four years in post. The Muslim Aid board got in touch again, to see whether Shabir would consider moving into the top role.

"I think I ended up in the interim chief executive role because I had no history with the charity," he says. "Because I was independent, people who talked about individual staff issues with me felt they were able to be very open, and the board felt I had created a good rapport with the senior leadership team."

Shabir describes feeling an "overwhelming" sense of responsibility – "there were easier ways to earn money, but I knew I had to try" – and his acceptance of the job came with one strict condition: "I'm only taking it on if you are truly willing to change."

The changes were swift and dramatic. The senior leadership team was rearranged, with a new set of managers moved into top roles, and the size of the charity's UK team was almost halved in a restructure.

"The first priorities were to get the right people on board and reduce our overall bill in the UK; we were 70-odd people when we started and by the time we finished the restructure we were a team of around 36," he says.

This decisive action was not just rooted in cost reduction, although balancing the charity's £5m deficit was a pressing issue.

For the longer term, Shabir says, the decision forms one part of Muslim Aid's commitment to decentralising its power and empowering field offices and local in-country teams who are best placed to make decisions in the interest of their communities.

"We want to transition to more of a partner model of working, and are now working towards that," he explains.

Shabir is also concentrating on rebuilding trust: a complicated challenge even at the best of times, let alone alongside such sweeping changes and during a pandemic.

"As chief executive you are always trying to find ways to measure the mood of the company," he says. "I believe I am naturally open with people, and we have created a lot more forums for people to speak."

The charity now runs a quarterly country director's meeting with the senior leadership team, and a monthly all-hands Zoom call, as well as informal conversations throughout the organisation, and fortnightly coffee meetings.

"I am not big on agendas, but if we share, and have platforms where staff can meet, share, relax a bit and talk about their challenges, things bubble up that can be made into agenda items," Shabir says.

Transformation and change are what he came to do, he says, but adds that anyone who has managed a change programme knows that it is not an exact science, and is a process that takes time. "The problems we have been dealing with at Muslim Aid are 20, maybe 30 years old, and they won't change overnight," he says.

"We need to remind ourselves again and again why we are in this work, and remind ourselves of the values and motivations behind the work. We are a faith-based charity, and that is not just a job."

Charity and the Muslim faith are fundamentally intertwined – a concept Shabir is seeking to embed in both his career and at the heart of everything that Muslim Aid does.

"My journey was always about whether I could make a living out of doing something good," he says. "When I transitioned into this role, I was asking myself not only whether I could manage to do it full time, but if it could fulfil a part of my religion and my purpose as well."

By the time you reach a chief executive post, he says, the reality is that there is not a lot of charity involved. "When you are running a £25m organisation you might feel good about going to bed at night because you are doing good work, but you won't get the same sense of fulfilment as you would packing a box of food to donate to a food bank. You are too far removed."

In fact, he says, the Western understanding of 'charity' does not appropriately fit the Muslim sector. "The culture is very different, even to other faith-based charities where the role of charity is specifically about the doing," he says.

"The role of charity in the Islamic faith is much wider than the sector. It is about doing good, being sincere, smiling in the face of your brothers and sisters. Yet in the Muslim sector, over the last 30 years, we have been trying to mold the Islamic word of 'charity' into

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the Western philosophy of what charity is supposed to be."

The trouble with this, he says, is that many faith-based approaches to charity simply do not fit within these systems – and, arguably, why should they try to?

"My issue with the Muslim sector, specifically is: why are we in this work if we are not looking to add our own value to the ways things are done?" Shabir explains.

"If we are not going to do this, then I may as well be doing my work for Red Cross, Oxfam, or Save the Children. We don't ask enough what faith means in relation to the ways we work, or why we aren't shouting about it and exploring it a lot more."

Faith-based strategy

Thinking creatively about how faith works alongside charity will also give Muslim Aid itself new avenues to develop and grow, Shabir says. Another strategic focus of his tenure is to review how the charity generates its income, and whether it can be evolved into more sustainable and reliable streams.

"Eighty per cent of income for the Muslim sector comes from individual giving, and a huge amount comes during Ramadan," Shabir says.

"It makes planning and budgeting a total headache, especially if the Charity Commission says: 'We want to see your accounts,' before we have hit Ramadan."

While Ramadan is an important time of giving in the Islamic calendar, it is not the only window during which people can give; and he believes charities could encourage donors to spread their gifts more evenly throughout the year, create new giving platforms, and "plan better, so we can find different ways to give and transition the £500bn leaving the UK for overseas into structured giving through Muslim charities."

By creating more diverse income streams, Shabir also believes the Muslim charity sector could move away from a competitive reliance on seasonal donations. "A good example of this is child sponsorship programmes. There is fierce competition to make them cheaper, so that people can sponsor a child for £30 a month here, or £20 there; and you're thinking: 'How the hell do you do that? I've raised four kids and it can't be done,'" he says.

Shabir has suspended Muslim Aid's own child sponsorship programme while it undergoes a review – "so we could look at it in a holistic manner, and ask how it aligns with our faith. There are some very clear rules about what it means to look after a child – are we fulfilling it and setting the benchmark for these?"

Shabir is keen to stress that his interest in exploring the differences and unique elements to the Muslim charities sector is not about the different approaches to charity work being

right or wrong. "It's more the fact that, as a community, what is the point of being a Muslim charity if we are just going to do the same thing as everyone else?"

Values driven work

Seasonal donations were a saving grace for the sector in 2020, with the Muslim charity sector largely escaping the severe income hit that many organisations in the wider sector suffered as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

By the time the lockdown occurred, Muslim donors had already calculated their Zakat – a form of individual charitable giving rooted in the third pillar of Islam – and found a way to give to their charity of choice during Ramadan, so Muslim Aid was able to meet its revised targets. "I think Islamic Relief raised more during the pandemic than it did in the previous year," Shabir says.

But there was a heavy social and a spiritual impact on the community in the UK, with people unable to come together to pray at their mosques, and the cancellation of two Eid celebrations during the series of lockdowns. "The ignorance of government and its treatment of faith-based charities and communities was just appalling," Shabir says.

The longer-term impact on the sector, he believes, will come in the next 12 months. "As furloughs end and people lose their jobs, and income drops – like any community, there will be direct implications on how people give, whether through Zakat, if Muslim businesses fail, or if individuals go through hardship. We are starting preparations for Ramadan in January, and it looks as though we will still be under lockdown for that."

The role of an interim CEO is a strange one, requiring an individual to take on leadership responsibilities without a clear sense of how long they will be in post to see them through.

But with the decisive steps Shabir has taken to redirect Muslim Aid he hopes to have laid a foundation to set it up for future greatness – and at the end of 2020, he threw his hat into the ring to stay in the top job on a permanent basis.

His aspiration is that the charity will one day become a model of best practice ("like the Apple of the sector – you might not want to buy a MacBook, but everyone knows it's the best out there"), backed by strategies and solutions that inspire excellence, supporting and evolving a relationship with the Muslim community, and rebuilding trust in a way that aligns the organisation with its faith.

"We have to drive everything by the values of justice, compassion, mercy and dignity," he says, "and maintain them through our programme design, fundraising efforts, and our whole change process – no matter how difficult that becomes."