



Girl power Ruby is the first mare to pull the horse-drawn barge at Tiverton, Dorset, along the Grand Western canal. "It was magical," Philip Brind, her owner, said

Imams join forces in pursuit of a more progressive Islam

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Britain's most senior Muslim clerics are planning to set up their first national council to issue religious rulings that promote a progressive interpretation of Islam, *The Times* has learnt.

It will be the first central religious authority for British Muslims, delivering edicts on Islamic doctrine and providing a national voice on social issues. It would state clearly that "regressive cultural practices" such as forced marriages and "honour" killings have no place in Islam or in British society.

Unlike the Church of England, there is no hierarchical structure to Islam in



Qari Asim said the board would oppose regressive cultural practices

this country, with most mosques operating independently. Many Sunni Muslim countries, by contrast, have a grand mufti and national religious bodies. Many are crying out for leadership, Qari Asim, chief imam of the Makkah Mosque in Leeds, said. "There's a lack of an authoritative public voice to speak out on issues such as terrorism and Islamophobia."

Mr Asim, 39, is one of the UK's most prominent imams. He is seen as a progressive voice, condemning terrorist attacks and campaigning against forced marriage. He is an adviser to a Commons inquiry into Sharia councils. He was appointed an MBE in 2012.

Who speaks for Muslims?

- There are 2.8 million Muslims in Britain, mostly from a Sunni background, but also from Shia and Ahmadi denominations. There is no single religious leader for British Muslims and no universally recognised group to speak for all.
- Several umbrella groups exist, inviting mosques to sign up as affiliated members, to co-ordinate community projects and issue public statements.
- The Muslim Council of Britain has 500 affiliated members and is run by a lay secretary-general, Harun Khan. The council was embraced by the Labour government after the 2005 terrorist attacks, but relations were cut in 2009 when a senior member signed a declaration in support of Hamas. Relations resumed in 2010, but were not rekindled by the coalition. It founded the annual Visit My Mosque Day project.
- Minab, the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board, was founded with ministers' backing in 2006 to promote good governance. Public money was stopped in 2014 over concern about some of its 500 members. Its founder said it was better to engage with those holding controversial views. The group is dormant, but floated plans to reform last year.
- The British Muslim Forum has about 500 members. It issued a fatwa in 2005 against terrorism after the July 7 attacks. The group aims to promote cohesion between communities and focuses on social issues.
- Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra and Moulana Sayed Ali Abbas Razawi were invited to represent Sunni and Shia communities at a Commonwealth Day service at Westminster Abbey with the Queen last year. Imam Qari Asim appeared with the Archbishops of Canterbury and Westminster and the chief rabbi at a vigil for victims of the Westminster terrorist attack.

He said that imams from groups such as the British Muslim Forum and Imams Online were discussing setting up a theological group of senior imams to deal with "interpretational issues". Imams from different denominations would be nominated to this board by their mosques.

"The conversation is taking place," he said. "There is a need and internal pres-

sure as young Muslims want to see more clarity." He said the board must "speak out against any regressive cultural practices of the community itself that are against universal human values".

Mr Asim said: "The board must take a progressive stance that is in line with Islamic principles and embedded in a British context. For instance, Islam

strictly prohibits 'honour killing' and forced marriages, but misogynistic cultures have disempowered women.

"The board must also champion and be proactive on issues that affect the Muslim community as much as the remainder of the community, for example climate change and taboo issues such as mental health and obesity." The board could insist that gay Muslims "should not be persecuted or ostracised".

Existing bodies such as the Muslim Council of Britain and the dormant Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board are umbrella bodies and do not rule on religious doctrine. Successive governments have broken off relations over concerns about controversial views expressed by affiliated members.

Mr Asim, who described yesterday's attack in Barcelona as depraved, said an imams' board would include conservative views, but take a progressive stance. He said there would be mixed feelings about the board, but there was a need for a sensible voice.

Times data shows that there are more than 1,200 mosques in Britain. A minority belong to local "councils", but most issue their own rulings.

Mr Asim said that a board would provide more authoritative rulings, with imams expected to engage with the wider community. It could be welcomed as an authoritative Muslim voice by the government and media and could amplify the efforts of individual mosques that condemned extremism but often did not receive national media coverage.

He said that imams needed to "do their homework" and could ask other faith groups for advice.

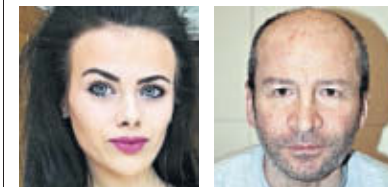
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Police cleared in barmaid murder case

A police force's response to the report that a woman who was later murdered had gone missing was prompt and proper, an investigation has found.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) looked at the way Northamptonshire officers acted when India Chipchase's mother alerted them in January last year.

The barmaid, 20, was drunk outside NB's nightclub in Northampton early on January 31 when Edward Tenniswood, 53, said he would take her home.



India Chipchase was raped and killed by Edward Tenniswood at his home

Instead the alcoholic book-keeper took her to his home where he raped and strangled her. He was jailed for life last August and must serve at least 30 years.

The IPCC said: "Police initially graded the report as medium risk. It was escalated to high following additional information and police viewing CCTV footage from outside [the] nightclub which showed India being approached by a man." The assessments were appropriate, the report said.

Tenniswood was arrested a week earlier for being drunk and disorderly and released the next day. The IPCC found that police had acted properly on that occasion and in 2015 when an assault claim against him was judged to have been unfounded.

New Forest admits defeat on mushrooms

The Forestry Commission has admitted that it is powerless to stop mushroom picking in the New Forest in Hampshire, despite implying last year that the practice was illegal, because the ban is not enforceable in law.

Last autumn the commission said that it was "no longer permitting picking on any scale" — but the statement has been replaced this year with one asking people not to take mushrooms. Campaigners had called for the clampdown to be enforced because of the harm being done to the countryside.

People are allowed to forage as long as they do so for personal use, taking no more than 1.5kg of mushrooms per visit. A commercial ban remains in place because the area is a designated site of special scientific interest.

A spokesman for the commission said: "Last year's experience has shown that we need to make the legal position clearer." A statement now says: "Fungi are essential to the New Forest ecosystem, so we are appealing to people to look, but please don't pick."

Michael Jordan, chairman of the Fungus Conservation Trust, said: "The harm done to the countryside every autumn has been awful. Areas have been stripped bare, often for commercial benefit, by people who have caused damage by trampling as well as picking."

Edible mushrooms in the forest include ceps, chanterelles and morels. In 2014 a Court of Verderers in the forest revealed that eastern European gangs had been illegally harvesting them.