In the wake of the events of 11 September 2001 and, more recently, the attacks on London in July 2005, relations between British Muslims and various agencies of the state has been a sustained focus of public and academic debates. With the current prominence of wide sweeping anti-terrorism measures, which many regard as a threat to freedoms enshrined in international and domestic human rights legislation (Liberty 2005), much of this debate has understandably coalesced around the role of the criminal justice system. However, attention is also now beginning to turn to the long-established role played by other public bodies and institutions, at local as well as national levels, in compounding British Muslim experiences of social and political marginalisation. One arena of governmental administration that has become a source of focus, both in Britain and across other European states, is urban planning (see the November 2005 special issue of the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, on ‘Mosque conflicts in Europe’).

Whilst the effects of planning may be less immediate and its operations less overtly politicised (and politicising) than those of the police and wider criminal justice system, the interactions between British Muslims and the planning system nevertheless constitute an important dimension of the wider pattern of inequality to which Muslim groups are exposed. At the most general level, as Huw Thomas (2000) has rightly observed, the planning system does not operate in a social and cultural vacuum, but in a context where group relations, socially and spatially, are characterised by significant patterns of racialisation. Viewed in this light, planning has a considerable stake in contributing to – as well as an important potential role in overcoming – the reproduction of inequalities experienced by Muslims and other minority groups. Secondly, at the more specific level,
through exerting control over the use and development of (urban) space, the planning system is a crucial institutional nexus for deciding the fate of Muslim and attempts by other religious groups to establish viable places of worship, with bureaucratic input into not only the location, but also the design and use of religious premises. The present chapter presents the results of qualitative research to explore how some of these issues have played out in the experiences of a number of Muslim groups, taking the West Midlands city of Birmingham as a case study.

Pioneering research undertaken in Birmingham in the early 1980s revealed some of the effects of planning procedure on Muslims attempting to establish mosques and education centres (madrasas) in the city. This research was highly critical of the local planning authority. Following a review of contentious planning cases, the research concluded that there had been “a shameful record of planning refusals and enforcement notices” in Birmingham throughout the 1970s (Hodgins 1981: 24). Furthermore, it was argued that there had been “a prima facie case of racial [sic] discrimination” in the city, in terms of the City Council’s treatment of Muslims who had applied for permission to establish religious facilities (Hodgins 1981: 24; see also Grudzinska 1982). Somewhat later, in a survey of British local authority responses to Muslims needs, Jørgen Nielsen (1988) found the situation to have improved in the city, with Birmingham being one of a handful of planning authorities in Britain to have adopted detailed planning policies specifying how the authority would respond to applications to develop Muslim and other religious premises. Specifically, Nielsen found that the City Council had adopted a new policy in 1981 that allowed “a much more flexible approach” than had previously been the case, easing some of the earlier restrictions, particularly upon the use of houses for religious purposes (Nielsen 1988: 60). Nielsen found that many of the cases in which premises had been used without planning permission had been resolved, thus providing “evidence of the improvement brought about by the new policy” (Nielsen 1988: 60).

However, there has been little recent research to bring these earlier findings up to date.1 The purpose of the present chapter is to resume the focus of this earlier research and assess how the situation in Birmingham has developed in the intervening years.2 The paper is divided into two sec-

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1 Although see Nye (2001) for an important discussion of the experiences of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in a planning case against Hertsmere Borough Council near London; see also Gale (1999) for Leicester.

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