

MUSLIM PARENTS ASSOCIATION - HIGH WYCOMBE

Chairman: Rafiq Raja, 34 Perth Road, High Wycombe Bucks, HP13 6XX. Tel: (01494) 450819
Secretary: Mrs Rashida Kazi, 156 Hughenden Avenue, High Wycombe, Bucks. Tel: (01494) 447262
Vice Chairman: Chaudhry Mohammed Shafique, Treasurer: Haji Mohammed Abdullah

Minutes of the 2007 Annual Reception held at Bucks New University on Wednesday 28 November 2007.

Present: There were about 45 people present.

- 1 Welcome and introductions;** the Chairman welcomed all present. He also outlined the evening's programme and welcomed our special guest – Sir Mark Lyall-Grant from the foreign & Commonwealth Office and former High Commissioner to Pakistan
- 2 Talawat of Quran** – A short passage from the Holy Quran was recited by Imam Sultan Mahmood with a translation in English.
- 3 Apologies for Absence**
Dr Katy Simmons, Sue Imbriano, Louise Goll, Cllr Mrs Lesley Clarke, Cllr Marion Clayton, Cllr Mike Appleyard, AKM Ismael, Mohammed Khaliel, and a few more.
- 4 Current Issues facing the MPA - Chairman**
The Chairman opened the formal discussions by reviewing the role and purpose of the MPA and the following points were covered:
 - The MPA has a role in improving the educational achievements of Muslim children
 - The MPA's "agenda" is helping parents and pupils to achieve their potential
 - There needs to be a focus on cohesion, lack of which stems from disparity in levels of income, which stem from the educational performances and subsequent employments.
 - The "passport" of 5 GCSE's at A* - C is the target for all Muslim children and there needs to be a way to get the Muslim community to focus on education
 - The MPA seeks to reduce the gap in achievement between Muslim and non Muslim children via a number of means including a positive dialogue with Bucks LEA – Louis Goll and her team
 - From a national perspective Wycombe's Muslim children are on a par with other Muslim groups around the country but in the local context they are behind and the gap is about 20%
 - The MPA seeks to be a "bridge" between Muslim parents and the educational "establishment" and has provided mediation as well as other services
 - The chairman stressed for all sections of the community to tackle underachievement and remove the obvious causes of disparity and hoped that all of us will be pulling in the same direction
- 5 BCC View – Yvette Thomas (Advisor on Diversity at Bucks CC)**
Yvette thanked the Chair for inviting her to the Reception and in the course of her presentation the following points emerged:
 - It is important that as many Muslim parents as possible get involved in the education of their children
 - A meeting was hosted by the MPA and supported by BCC to try and attract new governors from the Pakistani community. Although pleased with the outcome things would have been better if more had turned up
 - BCC are currently working on setting up a Black & Minority Ethnic steering group. The body will be a Consultative group with public representation. There has already been a meeting with the MPA on this.
 - Ofsted have recognized the improvement in attainment levels but it is a slow process and more needs to be done
 - METAS are working on raising attainment in the BME and traveler communities
 - BCC are keen to encourage community based support to help improve attainment levels and

they have already been involved in Oakridge where they have set up a mothers group in the Pakistani community and they are looking to work with Adult Learning to raise levels of parental education

- BCC need the community to support them

The Chair thanked Yvette for her contribution to the meeting

6 What are other groups doing around Britain – Tahir Alam (Muslim Council of Britain?)

The Chair welcomed Tahir Alam from the Muslim Council of Britain where he is the Education Spokesman and thanked him for travelling from Birmingham to be with us. During his talk the following points were covered:

- The view of the MCB is that education is very important and Tahir referenced the views of Malcolm X in this regard where he said “Education is the passport to the future” which should be a guiding principle for all
- All children need to be given the best opportunity to succeed in education
- Tahir praised the efforts of the MPA in raising awareness about underachievement and commented that this was the role he had in the MCB. He said that he sees the same issue around the country i.e. a gap in achievement
- He expressed concern that the “old” measure of attainment (5 A*-C grades not including English & Maths) and not the new one which does include English and Maths is generally used. The consequence is that the gap is even higher 46% cf 32% using the “new” measure
- At university level Muslim participation is the same as others
- Based on the current situation the MCB project that it will take 80 yrs to close the gap which clearly is unacceptable
- Tahir indicated that the MCB would be happy to help the MPA in holding seminars to convince Muslim parents to become school governors and raise the priority of the importance education plays in their children’s future
- Ownership of the issue by the community is essential in order to solve the situation and we need dynamism and engagement from the community. Development work in this area will foster improvement
- Tahir brought to the attention of everyone the booklet that the MCB had issued called “Meeting the needs of Muslim children in education”

Tahir was thanked by the Chair for his valuable contribution

7 Role of the MPA in promoting community cohesion – Chauhdry Shafique (MPA Vice Chair)

Mr Shafique opened his talk by welcoming Sir Mark Lyall –Grant on behalf of the directorate of BNU and then went on to cover:

- Reference was made to the significance of the Muslim community in Wycombe being the second largest faith group and that the St Vincentian community being the next largest to the island itself. This was to be seen in the context of the mix within the Wycombe community and a demonstration of the cohesion that exists
- He referred to the events of August 2006 as a reminder of the difficulties that we do have but also made mention of the community support that exists too
- In the aftermath of Aug 2006 an initiative had been set up with all faiths in the town and now there is a ‘Council for Christian and Muslim Relations’ which had a successful launch a couple of weeks ago
- One of the significant challenges that needs to be faced is the unsustainability of the “Clash of Civilisations” i.e. Muslim v West and the need to overcome this and co exist
- Despite the challenges there is much to be proud of in Wycombe from a cohesion perspective

The Chair thanked Shafique for his contribution and took the opportunity to mention the recent Bangladesh disaster and Bilal Ali made an appeal for support and a collection was held (over £50 was collected for the appeal at the meeting).

8 Special Guest: Sir Mark Lyall-Grant – Political Director General at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office

The Chairman welcomed our special guest to the evening and referred to meeting him during his time as High Commissioner of Pakistan. Sir Mark then went on to introduce his colleague Natasha Khan before speaking about the role of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the following points were noted:

- The FCO face a challenge in achieving diverse representation which is being worked on
- The FCO is responsible for foreign policy, consular staff, visa offices and business development
- The policy priorities of the FCO which have just been recently formulated with the change at ministerial level (David Milliband now being Foreign Secretary) and cover
 - Counter terrorism and proliferation
 - Building a low carbon, high growth global economy
 - Preventing and resolving conflict
 - Building a strong and just International System and EU policy
- Sir Mark made some observations regarding Pakistan:
 - Reflections on the difficulties especially between Musharaf and the judiciary
 - Economic improvements i.e. increased GDP and increased privatization in industry
 - Improvements in the relationship with the UK
 - Recognition of the contribution made by Musharaf and Vajpay to improved relationships between Pakistan and India
 - Support given to the fight against terrorism by Pakistan
 - Cooperation in intelligence activities between Pakistan, the UK and rest of the international community
 - Expansion of local democracy in Pakistan and protection of women
 - Increase in bilateral aid from the UK to Pakistan (£460M over the next 3 yrs) and the signing of a 10yr development agreement are signs of improving relations
- All of these achievements are under threat as a result of the state of emergency declared by Musharaf. Maintaining the state of emergency will deepen the divisions not heal them and that is what has lead to the Commonwealth suspending Pakistan's membership
- The key tasks are to hold free and fair elections to complete the transition to a free democracy, lift the state of emergency well ahead of the elections and free the remaining judiciary and press from imprisonment. Building a national consensus was also important.

Sir Mark took questions from the floor which covered the Iran situation, relationships between the UK and Israel and the UK's support for Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and Musharaf.

At the conclusion of the discussions Sir Mark was thanked by the Chair for having come to visit us and spend time with the MPA given the demands on his time.

9 Vote of Thanks – Cllr Glyn Galbraith (associate member of MPA and District councilor)

The vote of thanks was proposed on behalf of the MPA by Cllr Glyn Galbraith. He thanked Yvette Thomas for coming to meet us again and her support, Tahir Alam for taking the time to travel from Birmingham and his valuable contribution and offer of help, to Shafique and to Sir Mark Lyall –Grant for his valuable and insightful talk about the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and his views on Pakistan. All members joined in a round of applause as a mark of their appreciation

The meeting ended at 9.05 p.m with thanks to Bucks new university for their kind hospitality & Thara stores for providing the refreshments.