
*“He Who Knows Himself,
Knows His Lord”*

[Hadith]

British Muslim or West?

A Personal Development & Leadership Programme for Muslim Boys and Young Men

March 2008



1.0 Introduction & Background

1.1 The aim of this project was to undertake prevention and personal self-development work with young Muslim boys and men in the London Borough of Brent.

1.2 It was delivered by An-Nisa Society, a women-managed organisation working for the welfare of Muslim families, and funded by the Government Office for London through the Preventing Violent Extremism Pathfinder Fund. The bid was facilitated by Brent Youth Service. Project monitoring and finance has since been the responsibility of Brent Council's Diversity Directorate and West London Alliance.

2.0 The Project proposal

2.1 The programmes to be delivered will focus on prevention and personal development work with young Muslim boys and men, at different levels according to their age.

- i. The programmes will target boys aged between 13 and 15 years of age, young men aged between 16 and 19.
- ii. The aim is that by the end of the Programmes, An-Nisa will have engaged with 60 boys and young men.
- iii. An-Nisa will deliver a total of 45 workshops.
- iv. All the workshops will be facilitated by Muslims from Muslim faith and culture perspectives.
- v. An-Nisa will also work with Brent Youth Service staff to build capacity for those interested in developing their skills to work with Muslim youth.
- vi. The Programmes will also be signposting the participants towards other services or programmes in Brent for young people.

2.2 The Programme

The programme was designed to explore what it means to be a Muslim, British, young and male through creative mediums such as multi-media, IT, art, drama, poetry and music, particularly from a Muslim/Islamic perspective.

The overall title of the project was 'British Muslim or Wot?'

This programme was delivered through:

- A two-week summer scheme for boys aged 13-15years.
- A film project targeting young men aged 16-19 years – ‘Say it on Film.’
- A pilot Muslim Identity project working with Muslim boys in 2 Brent secondary schools

2.3 Objectives:

To explore the following:

- i. Issues of Identity – what it means to be British, Muslim, young and male.
- ii. Islam and Muslim culture – its influence on identity.
- iii. Personal history – explore family roots and migration/conversion stories.
- iv. Relationships – with family, friends – peer groups, gender.
- v. Wider issues and how they impact – socio-economic-political, global politics, Islamophobia, extremism & terrorism, racism etc.

2.4 To provide a safe space with skilled facilitators to harness their potential by listening to what young people have to say, acknowledge and empathise with their dilemmas and explore the issues and concerns identified by them constructively.

2.5 To facilitate the development of Muslim male professionals as facilitators, mentors and role models.

2.6 To set up an Advisory Group of Muslim professionals was set up to advise and support the project.

3.0 Evaluation

3.1 An external action research evaluation survey was undertaken by the Office of Public Management (OPM), which has been sent directly West London Alliance.

3.2 The evaluation was intended to take account of the following:

- i. The extent to which participants’ felt welcomed and acknowledged as part of the wider British society.

- ii. Participants' perceptions of statutory agencies specifically – local authorities and the police.
- iii. The number of participants who feel they have the capacity and skills to address tensions/problems within their local neighbourhood and community.

4.0 Total number of participants and sessions

4.1 Final participants and sessions

Project	Sessions	Participants
Summer scheme	32	12
Say It On Film	30 + 20	12
Claremont	6	15
John Kelly	3	17
TOTAL	91	56
TOTAL REQUIRED	45	60

4.2 An-Nisa Society delivered 91 workshops – more than double the number required. We had booked over 60 participants but some did not turn up. We would have exceeded the total participants if all those that had booked turned up.

5.0 Other outcomes of BMW project

5.1 Furthering skills - Many of the boys on the film project have been continuing developing the skills they have learnt through the project. Three of them have been working with independently with Khandera Productions on other initiatives.

5.2 Claremont School parenting course - following contact with Claremont we were contacted by their Pupil Support Manager to discuss the possibility of being a partner for a parenting skills project. A meeting was held and we have agreed to this project. Funding was agreed.

5.3 John Kelly Cohesion training - following contact with JKTC we were asked to do a

presentation on the BMW project at a teacher's cohesion training workshop. This workshop took place on 10 December 2007. At this workshop made contact with Somali youth group meeting at JKTC.

5.4 Hayaa youth project in Hounslow asked An-Nisa to run a workshop on Gender in their training series, which took place on 22 March 2008.

5.5 Berkshire Forum Against Extremism - panel member on Question Time in Slough at a local FE college 6.30pm on 21 January 2008.

5.6 Interview on The Daily Politics Show on BBC 2 – In March 2008 about the impact of PVE funding.

5.7 End of Project Gala event - There will be an end of project Gala Event which will show case all of the work on this project as well as other projects on identity An-Nisa Society has done recently.

6.0 Findings

6.1 The key element of the 'British Muslim or Wot?' (BMW) Project was to provide a safe space where young Muslim boys and men could develop their self-confidence and to build a new narrative about being young, British and Muslim.

6.2 The importance of personal development and responsibility was inspired by a saying of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) "**He who knows himself, Knows his Lord**" which affirms the importance of identity, self-knowledge and personal responsibility.

6.3 When young people go through a crisis of identity they become insecure in 'who' they are and 'where' they belong. Without an affirmation of their identity and a positive sense of self, they can be vulnerable to being led into negative lifestyles or beliefs. Since 1985 An-Nisa Society has been addressing these issues through our extensive and broad ranging work with children and young people. This enabled us to very quickly develop a programme and get on board appropriate facilitators and advisors.

6.4 The boys and young men that participated in the different aspects of the project reflected a variety of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. There was also significant participation of boys and young men from refugee families and female led lone parent households.

6.5 Parent/guardians were engaged with and kept informed of the various initiatives as much as possible. Feedback was very positive from parents/guardians who were

extremely pleased that their sons were being given this opportunity. An important requisite for parental support was the trust they had with An-Nisa due to its long track record.

6.6 The boys and young men were comfortable with participating in an initiative run by an organisation managed by women. There was no negative feedback and in fact it was seen as something positive and enhanced the discussion. It was a practical and subliminal demonstration of gender equality in Islam.

6.7 Virtually all of the participants, except for those that attended An-Nisa Society's Supplementary Muslim School, had never taken part in any other (either mainstream or Muslim) youth project/activity. They strongly expressed how bored they were outside of school times.

6.8 There was an obvious difference between the age groups we worked with. The 13-15 year age group was at the cusp between where engagement was possible and total disengagement. With the 16-19 year age group it was apparent that they were increasingly living their lives disconnected from their families, the Muslim community and society as a whole.

6.9 The success of this project demonstrated that with a sensitive and well-thought out programme young Muslims, particularly males, can be positively engaged and retrieved from becoming alienated and marginalised. However, simply providing sports and so on, in a vacuum, is not sufficient. It is imperative to provide locally based, on-going quality initiatives led by skilful facilitators.

6.10 Growing up in this cultural environment participants inevitably were also part of current emerging trends, especially the recent national concerns about young people. Young Muslims have added dimensions to contend with such as Islamophobia, social exclusion, negative media reporting and anger over foreign policy.

6.11 What was most alarming and concerning was the extent of internalisation of the cocktail of issues by these young Muslims. Without any outlets and forums to express themselves they simply 'bottled up' their feelings.

6.12 The opportunity to discuss all these sensitive issues with their Muslim peers was a unique and cathartic experience. They felt they were not alone in their feelings and experiences and were able to 'speak from the heart' for the first time. Being in a Muslim safe-space assisted in this process.

6.13 Most of the participants were initially very guarded and reluctant to discuss the issues connected to extremism and radicalisation due to concern that they were

being pigeon holed or monitored. Because of such fears they had learned to keep their views to themselves. Many said that extremism had been dealt with at their schools but they had always felt unable to fully express themselves in that context. Trust having been developed they began to open up and articulate their feelings of frustration and anger at the negative imagery of Islam and Muslims in the media, foreign policy and at being stereotyped by the actions of the few.

6.14 Most participants considered 'Stop and Search' a norm generally amongst young people but even more so for young Muslim men. Participants felt that when 'you look obviously Muslim' you become more of a target. Responses to this varied with most responding with resignation but with feelings of hurt that as Muslims they are all considered potential terrorists. Once again, issues that they are internalising.

6.15 The young people also raised the issue of the growth of Muslim-led male gangs. Some of the participants had experience of these groups and felt that they were using religion (of which they had little knowledge) as a convenient mantle with which to bully/terrorise others. Most of the participants felt that the reason that some Muslim boys get involved in gangs was because they have nothing else to do and are not part of anything constructive.

6.16 During the course of all the projects there was a marked change of attitude and behaviour of participants. Apathy and cynicism very quickly changed to motivation and inspiration as the participants engaged with the programme. Feedback from parents confirmed that their sons had become self-motivated to attend. Some of the boys in the younger group had been keen to come as otherwise they would be bored in the holidays. Most of the others, however, were initially forced to come but after the first day or two had become keen to get to the project themselves.

6.17 In each of the projects participants were taught new skills and were surprised at how much they enjoyed them. They were particularly motivated by the drama techniques, media skills, filming, Islamic art and film production. One participant developed his own script outside of the project and others have continued to use what they have learned independently. Khandera Productions has been working with three participants on other filming projects and developing their skills.

6.18 Boys and young men generally tend to be unwilling to perform in public, more so for young Muslims. However, the self-assurance that they built up over the course of the projects enabled them to present their work in front of an audience. Most were nervous but all managed to do so and consequently boosted significantly their self-esteem and confidence.

6.19 All the facilitators were Muslim and male with experience of working with young people. They provided an essential mentoring and role model function. A high

percentage of participants did not have a significant male figure in their lives and the role played by the facilitators was essential in building self-esteem and a feeling of security. Feedback from all the age range of boys and young men was very positive and enthusiastic about the facilitators.

6.20 An-Nisa proved guidance and support to facilitators on how best to deliver their workshops. This is because most of them had little or no experience of working on a project with a focus on Muslim identity and with all the aspects interlinking and connecting. It was a learning process for them too. There is a need to develop training for facilitators to equip them with the background knowledge and opportunities to develop meaningful work with young Muslims.

6.21 All participants were very keen to get involved in on-going initiatives once their particular project was over. But An-Nisa Society, like the majority of the Muslim voluntary sector (other than mosques and religious establishments), does not have premises, staff and funding for regular on-going activities which the participants could join - thereby keeping them engaged after the project had ended.

6.22 With short term project funding such as this, it is very disheartening to have engaged with the young people, inspired them and made positive changes in their self-image and world view that we did not have the resources to take them further.

7.0 Project Funding and Monitoring

7.1 Hostility to receiving funding through the PVE strand is very high and on the occasions when the source of this funding was known we had to explain that our projects were within a personal development framework. It was only through the trust that the community has in An-Nisa that we were able to calm the fears and suspicion within the community.

7.2 We were informed in late May 2007 that we had been successful with the funding and by the time meetings had been held and paperwork sorted out we had lost almost three months of project development time. This lost us crucial time, as it was difficult to schedule such an intensive programme around school and exams in the time that was left. However, by prioritising this project we were able to put together the first segment of the programme to start in the last week of July, enrol sufficient participants and complete the whole programme on schedule.

7.3 Monitoring and accountability are essential for any public funded initiative. However, in this case the monitoring requirements were excessive and there were constant requests for information and feedback. This put a tremendous burden on

us in view of the late start of the project and our limited capacity and resources.

7.4 Getting funding late and in arrears was extremely problematic. Most Muslim organisations do not have funds in hand that can cover payments until grant funding is released. Grants should be paid quarterly in advance rather than after expenditure has been made. Having made financial commitments we were placed in a difficult position, as we could not make payments on time.

7.5 It was a good initiative to bring the boroughs in West London together in a joint project targeting Muslims. However, because it was a new development and everyone was learning, it created problems at our end as project deliverers. From our point of view the three way relationship between Brent, Hounslow and An-Nisa caused delays and too much administration. Attending key meetings in Hounslow was just not practical for us in Brent.

7.6 Networking between the other project deliverers did not happen and we did not know until the end what some of the other groups were doing. It would have promoted joint working and networking opportunities if there was more clarity and information about all the work being undertaken across the country, and in particular in West London.

7.8 During the course of this project we have developed a good relationship with the Diversity Directorate at Brent Council. In the future it would also be beneficial to have targeted support from Brent in assisting us to achieve sustainability as an organisation and helping us to address our problems around lack of premises and core funding. This will better enable us to take the work forward.

8.0 Recommendations & Way Forward

8.1 A mapping exercise should be carried out to survey the activities and initiatives for young people in Brent in order to determine whether young Muslims are accessing them and to help in developing appropriate services.

8.2 Muslim youth initiatives and projects should be provided offering a range of opportunities such as working in a gender specific and mixed gender context as well as those that target families.

8.3 Further work needs to be developed on issues affecting Muslim young people in schools particularly with regards to alienation and identity. Schools also need to actively address the issue of institutional Islamophobia and provide training to staff on faith and cultural awareness on Islam and Muslim issues.

8.4 Dialogue needs to be set up with local police on the issue of stop and search and its targeting of young Muslim men. Issues such as religious profiling, treatment of young Muslims in the criminal justice system and police communication and relations with Muslim communities need to be addressed.

8.5 A Brent-wide website/forum should be set up to enable young Muslims to have a voice on issues that affect them.

8.6 A pool of male facilitators should be formed who can run workshops in schools and within Muslim community projects on Muslim culturally specific issues through multi-media, art, history, drama etc. Resources need to be made available to fund costs and for opportunities for facilitators to collaborate to develop new approaches. The facilitators would also work on initiatives to bring Muslims and other communities together.

8.7 Use the learning from the projects undertaken to produce a Tool kit, which can be a resource not only for projects in Brent but also across the UK.

8.8 Set up a website as a resource to provide accurate advice and support on Muslim issues and needs to mainstream service providers and agencies, including schools and young peoples' services. This would enable them to better understand and provide for their Muslim communities.

General recommendations

8.9 Funding should be allocated specifically to Muslim initiatives generally, and for young people specifically until it becomes an implicit reality in mainstream service delivery. Otherwise there is a danger that funding targeting Muslims may get lost in the system. Initiatives and funding should be over a longer period to ensure continuity. Grants should be paid quarterly in advance rather than after expenditure has been made.

8.10 Mainstream statutory service providers need to address the issues of institutional Islamophobia within their own services. They need to ensure that policies are in place to actively tackle it and to provide appropriate Muslim-sensitive services. Brent needs to let its Muslim community know that it takes Islamophobia seriously – this is essential in making Brent's Muslim communities/young people feel less alienated and marginalised.

8.11 The under-capacity and lack of premises in the Muslim voluntary sector needs to be addressed as a priority. There are few independent Muslim venues, which can offer safe places for young people (and women) to get together in order to enable personal development and to address the issues that affect them.

8.12 The government needs take on board that it is not possible to deliver 'security led' initiatives through Muslim community groups as (a) it damages trust and credibility in frontline grassroots work and (b) it does not address the wider issues that have created the problems in the first place. Security issues need to be addressed separately by experts in this field.

8.13 The government needs to invest much more in community development projects, which target the holistic needs of Muslim families and young people. Funding should not be channelled solely through the preventing violent extremism label, which stigmatises the whole Muslim community as potential terrorists.