

# **VCSE Meeting to discuss Community Tensions in Bannerman Road and Easton Schools**

**4pm, Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2008**

## **SARI offices**

### **Present**

David Maggs (Chairing)	Bristol Multi-Faith Forum
Sarah Louise Minter	Bristol Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Forum
Mahmoud Matan	Community Development, BCC
Simon Bale	ISR
Felicity Russell	Community Development, BCC
Steve Stephenson	Race Equality and Human Rights Service
Qaiser Razzak	Equalities and Human Rights Service
Farooq Siddique	Bristol Muslim Cultural Society
Irene Prentice	Bristol Multi-Faith Forum
Amer Salman	Bangladeshi Association
Batook Pandya	SARI
Sudi Ahmed	SARI
Alex Raikes	SARI
Simon Nelson	Terence Higgins Trust
Anne James	Equalities Team, BCC
Ruth Pitter	Voscur

### **Apologies**

Heather Malcolm	Bristol Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Forum
Jonathan Charlesworth	EACH (Educational Action Challenging Homophobia)
Sukhinder	EACH
Gemma Lindsey	EACH

## **Why are we here?**

Voluntary sector organisations have a role to play in how we might help reduce community tension, how we could support the parents, how we could support the schools, balancing the rights. We are here to discuss a way forward.

## **Update**

**Farooq Siddique (FS)** Gave us an update on the situation so far. The situation was highlighted the week after Easter. Parents (some non-Muslim, and majority Muslim) felt they had not been consulted on the resources being used in the schools. When they initially tried to confront the schools they were told nothing, they did not know what the agenda was and there was a rumour circulating that homosexuality was being taught in schools.

The situation escalated due to the way parents were being treated, and this had led to the current situation. Although at no time did anyone in the Muslim community object to the anti-homophobic bullying agenda, the schools' presentations only centred on how they deliver their agenda. The breakdown in relationships was due to teachers fudging the issue, not being honest, and not giving the parents permission to object. Parents perceived that they and their children were not being respected. Some homophobic statements were made out of sheer frustration but this is not about Muslims against homosexuality - Muslims know what it is like to be discriminated against so they wouldn't wish it on anyone else. There is no harassment of the LGB community in Easton. It is against Islam to attack people for their beliefs even if beliefs are different. No one is trying to take anyone's right away, the parents just feel they want rights as parents.

## **What are the key issues?**

Parents feeling their rights are not being respected.

Parents thinking that homosexuality is being taught in schools.

Parents not feeling that they have a right to object.

There has been a breakdown in communication between school and parents.

The anti-bullying focus has been taken out of the Hate Crime agenda and homosexuality has been made a specific issue – this is now being misinterpreted.

**A discussion on the key issues for the schools followed. The points made by those present are listed below.**

The two Bristol schools volunteered to focus on the programme as part of their Inclusion work.

Easton had in-depth consultations with parents before the programme and there was no comeback at the time. Bannerman Road had a project around families called Same Difference which included a range of awareness raising, i.e. an exchange with an all white school in Weston super Mare, this current project was part of the agenda.

This programme is necessary in order to bring perspective of other relationships, as most books automatically normalise heterosexual relationships. Schools should not be forced to subvert LGB issues.

Staff were trained, and explored how information could be communicated in a child friendly way. Comments about 2 men kissing were rumours.

LGB relationships need to be represented as there's too much about heterosexuality.

Schools have a responsibility in challenging homophobic bullying. It's not just children who are LGB who are victims of homophobic bullying; it can be potentially aimed at anyone.

Within these schools there must be a balance in promoting different forms of anti-discrimination.

Schools already have books about other equalities issues, different backgrounds, ways of life, gender, race, etc – and need to catch up on challenging homophobia.

These 2 schools have been outstanding in their commitment to Equality and Diversity and adhering to guidance from the Local Authority – we need to commend them for that.

Homophobic incidents are increasing in schools, homophobic language is being used and it's been swept under the carpet for a long time. The programme is primarily about anti-bullying. The schools should have a right to teach that homophobic instances will not be tolerated. If unchallenged then attacks are usually increased. We would have expected both schools to have informed parents and carried out some pre-work about the programmes they were running with the children. This situation has now led to too many rumours in the community.

The media tries to highlight that these young people will live, work and have friends from LGB communities. They have to understand about coexisting in diverse communities or else LGB communities become obsolete. Homosexuality has a place to be taught in schools.

We cannot look at one equality strand without the other – it links with article 14 of the Human Rights Act – schools could be in breach of legislation if they cease to promote anti-homophobic bullying.

Information and training needs to be given to the teachers, this is not just about faith; it is also about culture; when not addressed rumours spread fast.

Schools must give the right message – parents were not respected or consulted.

The issue is about homophobia and how it is impacting on the life of these children. What is required is discussion with the parents,

resources for the parents about different communities and making sure parents understand this literature is no different from other material about inclusion. They may not like it but they can respect it. We don't see LGB relationships openly, LGB people do not feel equal then by withdrawing specific books this is an added injustice.

Schools were asked to withdraw the books and are now not clear what they can say. A child has experienced homophobic verbal abuse and now the school is not sure how they can deal with it, as they are afraid of being accused of promoting homosexuality. They are in a vacuum at the moment.

This is surely an issue of human rights; a school cannot say they are afraid to deal with homophobic incidents.

This is about communication and highlights the need for it to be done properly.

Teachers are fearing for their safety. When Q'uran is in conflict with the law of the land then it says the law of the land should take precedent.

## **Proposals**

The following proposals were made.

### **Proposal 1**

Send a questionnaire to all the parents, do research, and acquire knowledge as to what they deem to be acceptable and unacceptable and then come up with a resource which helps reinforces the Equalities Act. We cannot be making a mockery of the law of the land. 2 things – the books need to be back on the shelves – it is not a matter of anyone climbing down but a clear statement about what is right.

**Response:** Schools have been told there will be a month of the books being out of schools so we need to honour that at the moment.

### **Proposal 2**

Ensure people are really clear about what the legal framework is and offer parents the right to withdraw if they wish.

**Response:** Parents need information and we need to assist as a VCSE to help this, empower them – because this is good for the child. The less preferable option would be to allow the child to opt out of the specific lessons.

**Response:** We should not be giving parents the choice of opting out of the Equalities agenda.

**Response:** Who represents the parents?

### **Proposal 3**

Is there a need for us as a VCSE to run a meeting for all parents?

**Response:** We could help with the issue of schools communicating with parents – they may need some guidance on how they do that.

**Response:** We should plan a meeting for parents and not encourage parents to withdraw from anti-homophobic bullying education, and from the environment.

**Response:** The VCSE could take ownership away from the schools as the climate is not good for parents meeting with the schools at the moment.

### **Proposal 4**

Bristol City Council should be doing this with a smaller group to assist them. We should bring a group together to discuss this.

**Response:** The Tension Monitoring Group should take the lead on this – it's what they are tasked to do.

**Response:** I'm not sure that the Tension Monitoring would be able to do this, this is wider than the role they play and it should be facilitated at the highest level at the council.

### **Further comments were made**

Teachers are fearing for their safety but the law of the land must be respected. When Q'uran is in conflict with the law of the land then it says the law of the land should take precedent.

There is a community safety issue here especially regarding unaccompanied children being sent home.

The media will stir this up. The LGB Community is worried about going back to Section 28, and if there is any indication of this then LGB communities will oppose it without compunction. This will inflate the situation further. We don't want any bullying of anyone. You cannot tackle equalities issues without addressing homophobia.

The immediate is about current issues; we need to listen to the minority voices and well as the majority. The long term is about having a centralized curriculum – central agreement would prevent future issues occurring.

Parents are asking: What are we supposed to say when their child comes home and asks about same sex relationships? Muslim communities are getting the message it's okay to be gay which conflicts with their beliefs.

The issue has occurred now because materials were not properly delivered and there was no consultation.

Parents are feeling uninformed about the situation and we need to find ways to address that. Parents and the community must be supported.

But if the books came back what would happen?

There needs to be consultation with parents in bringing back the books.

There needs to be guidance. It would be difficult but if they don't come back then teachers will be undermined.

When people are attacked and bullied they go quiet and frightened. People will be in fear of speaking out for themselves and be in fear of raising issues.

How do we ensure it doesn't spiral? LGB communities are taxpayers who contribute to those schools and want fair and equal representation at those schools.

How do we tackle the bullying and make best use of the resources designed to do this? Homophobia and Islamophobia have increased because of this issue – no group is benefiting from this.

We can't be polarized about Islam and homosexuality.

### **The chair summarized**

This is a local situation, we need a local consultation, that is clear and open with support for parents to help talk through the issue. If there is homophobia then the schools need to deal with it and the council has a responsibility to help the process.

### **Conclusion**

It was agreed that a meeting should be held during the first week after the school break week commencing 21<sup>st</sup> April for schools and parents to find a way forward.

A range of materials should be presented to the parents with consultation about the resources

The group suggested that Anne James (BCC), Farooq Siddique (BMCS), Jonathan Charlesworth (EACH), and Qaiser Razzak (EHRC) offer to work with Bristol City Council in the facilitation of the meeting between schools and parents.

Those present at the meeting today from the VCSE will be willing to offer support and resources (time, expertise) if needed and to provide any support to the 3 VCSE representatives attending the Council-led meeting with schools and parents.

If the 3 reps felt a pre-meeting with this group was necessary then FS would get back to RP about arranging one before the Council-led meeting. SARI offered their premises if a meeting was necessary.

It was felt that this meeting was positive in initiating an open and honest debate, and looking at how we could work together to help find solutions. We hoped a Council-led meeting with schools and parents would be positive with a drive to move things forward.

## **Further developments**

Since the above meeting, a meeting has been called on 23<sup>rd</sup> April and is being facilitated by Bristol City Council with parents, schools, other partners and the 3 VCSE reps put forward by the group who met on 3<sup>rd</sup> April. The VCSE reps have requested a pre-meeting by the wider group to discuss issues which will help support them, and especially in seeking common ground for an agreed and unified voice in seeking solutions.

The date and time of the pre-meeting will be **Monday 21<sup>st</sup> April, 10.30am – 12noon** at the SARI offices.