

The Muslim Council of Britain – its history, structure and workings

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is an umbrella organisation dedicated to the common good, to the betterment of the community and country. It was inaugurated - after several years of wide-ranging consultation and careful planning - on November 23 1997 at the Brent Town Hall in Wembley by representatives of more than 250 Muslim organisations from all parts of Britain including Northern Ireland. The recent fifth annual general meeting (April 28 2002) affirmed the MCB's status as a vibrant coalition of grassroots organisations and institutions and individual talent and skills that is making a positive and constructive contribution to meeting the needs and the aspirations of the Muslim community in a period of recurring crises and anxious optimism.

History of community endeavours

Muslim communities naturally aspire to create forums for mutual cooperation and benefit. Among the first attempts at establishing a representative body was the Jamiat al-Muslimeen, founded in 1934, and which had branches in Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Newcastle. An early initiative of some vision came in 1962 when groups of students from six cities met in Birmingham to form the Federation of the Students Islamic Societies in the UK & Eire (FOSIS). The UK Islamic Mission was also formed the same year and pioneered Islamic bookshops and calendars that are today so commonplace. The first professional association was of medical doctors, when the Doctors Islamic Society was launched at the Bury General Hospital in 1968. The Muslim Educational Trust also came into being, addressing the needs of Muslim schoolchildren, and publishing the landmark 'First Primer of Islam' in April 1969. The Union of Muslim Organisations (UMO) was formed in 1970 and the Jamiat Ulema Britain was established in 1971. The UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs (UKACIA) was formed in September 1988 in the wake of the publication by Viking Penguin of Rushdie's profane and abusive book 'The Satanic Verses'. At about the same time, a federation of the Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Communities (KSIMC) was formally instituted. The Muslim Parliament, which grew out of the Muslim Institute for Research and Planning, was launched in 1992. Thus by the mid-1990s, a variety of representative bodies had evolved within the British Muslim community to respond to both general and specific concerns and crises.

The need to coordinate efforts on wider issues of common concern became apparent in the course of the Rushdie affair. This created a climate of trust and cooperation between many diverse groups. In April 1994, a meeting of Muslim organisations and institutions held at Golden Hillock Mosque and Community Centre in Birmingham adopted a working paper 'Towards an Islamic consensus on National Affairs'. An independent 'National Interim Committee on Muslim Affairs' (NICMU) was formed, and a working party was charged with the task of carrying out a countrywide consultation to collect data on perceptions of the problems facing the community, the need for greater coordination and possible organisational forms for a new umbrella body. The consultation took the form of a postal questionnaire survey conducted

between October 1994 and September 1995. The questionnaire was sent to about 1200 organisations and activists. The analysis of responses pointed to an overwhelming sense of anxiety on the future of the community. A typical sentiment was this comment from an experienced Muslim community leader of Bradford: “We need to develop an organisation that is seen to be positively engaged in dialogue with all sectors of British society. Muslims must come out of their enclaves and begin serious and positive but cogent moves to increase their influence in the areas of life which are significant to shaping their future.”

The overwhelming survey response to the question ‘Do you think there is a need for greater unity and coordination among Muslims in Britain’ - 96% of respondents said ‘Yes’ – encouraged the NICMU Working Party to create a sub-group to consider possible organisation structures for an umbrella body. Many valuable ideas were received in the course of the consultation, both from leaders of established community organisations as well as well-informed observers of the community – Sher Azam of the Bradford Council of Mosques, the writer Hassan Gai Eaton, solicitor Aina Khan, Professor Ghulam Nabi Saqeb, to name a few. The sub-group also collected constitutions and documents from a wide variety of Muslim institutions, including the Islamic Society of North America, the American Muslim Council, the Islamic Circle of North America, the Union of Muslim Organisations and the Muslim Parliament (for example its Bill No. 4 ‘The Muslim Parliamentary Groups’). The constitutions of non-Muslim faith bodies were also examined. The outcome of this work was a draft document entitled ‘Basic Elements of a Working Constitution for the Proposed Muslim Consultative Body’, presented to NICMU in January 1996, containing a number of organisational options for a new umbrella body. NICMU discussed the options and commissioned the sub-group to prepare a draft constitution.

The final meeting of the NICMU Working Party in May 1996 in Bradford, at the invitation of the Bradford Council of Mosques, adopted the Constitution and Standing Orders. The name ‘The Muslim Council of Britain’ (MCB) was chosen out of several proposed. NICMU dissolved itself and formed a ‘Preparatory Committee’ to publicise and invite affiliations to the MCB and prepare for the inaugural meeting. There followed a further period of consultation, during which meetings and road-shows were held in Manchester, Blackburn, and various parts of London. This work finally led to the Inaugural Meeting in November 1997 that was followed four months later by the first Annual General Meeting of the MCB in March 1998 when a Central Working Committee and office-bearers were elected for a two-year term.

The MCB was therefore formed after a period of sustained groundwork and extensive consultation. The emergence of the MCB is a natural expression of Muslim solidarity and a sign of growing maturity and confidence of British Muslims. It is an initiative of the community, led by the community, for the service of the community.

The MCB's Vision

The MCB gives practical shape and expression to the ties of faith and community that naturally bring Muslims of all social and cultural backgrounds together. It also brings people from various schools of thought and political outlooks together. It is an inclusive body that deals with issues in a practical, informed and rational manner.

It is an independent body that conducts its affairs with openness and transparency and in accordance with a constitution, without fear or favour. Its administrative expenses are funded entirely from affiliation fees and donations from Muslim individuals and institutional well-wishers. The aims of the MCB are recorded within its constitution (See Box I).

BOX I

Aims & Objectives of the MCB (from the Constitution)

- ❑ To promote cooperation, consensus and unity on Muslim affairs in the UK
- ❑ To encourage and strengthen all existing efforts being made for the benefit of the Muslim community
- ❑ To work for a more enlightened appreciation of Islam and Muslims in the wider society
- ❑ To establish a position for the Muslim community with British society that is fair and based on due rights
- ❑ To work for the eradication of disadvantages and forms of discrimination faced by Muslims
- ❑ To foster better community relations and work for the good of society as a whole

The MCB is opposed to labels such as 'ethnic minority' - we are British citizens with an Islamic heritage who stand by our citizenship responsibilities so long as the cause is just.

The MCB's approach to dealing with civic affairs is one of participation, not agitation; in dealing with government, it is one of constructive engagement. This means that the MCB strives to deal with problems and influence policies and outcomes through principled and effective participation, in conformity with Islamic norms and standards.

The MCB today has about 350 institutions affiliated to it including mosques, education and charitable institutions, women and youth organisations and professional bodies. Most of the main national and regional bodies are now members (see Box II).

BOX II

National & Regional affiliates of the MCB (April 2002)

NATIONAL AFFILIATES
Association of Muslim Schools
Council of Nigerian Muslim Organisations
Da'watul Islam UK & Eire
Federation of Students Islamic Societies (FOSIS)
Indian Muslim Federation
Islamic Forum Europe
Islamic Society of Britain - National
Jama'at Ahle Sunnat UK
Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith UK
Jamiat-e-Ulema Britain
Muslim Association of Britain
Muslim Doctors and Dentists Association
Muslim Solidarity Committee
Muslim Students Society UK & Eire
Muslim Welfare House (London)
Muslim Women Society (MWS)
Muslim Women's Association
UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs
UK Islamic Mission (National)
UK Turkish Islamic Association
World Federation of KSIMC
World Islamic Mission (Central Office)
Young Muslim Organisation UK
Young Muslims UK (National)
REGIONAL AFFILIATES
Bolton Mosques Council for Community Care
Confederation of Sunni Mosques Midlands
Council of Mosques, London & Southern Counties
Federation of Muslim Organisations - Leicestershire
Islamic Forum Europe - North Branch
Lancashire Council of Mosques
Sussex Muslim Society

It is working to increase the number of affiliations, particularly from under-represented communities. Britain is a unique melting pot for Muslims coming from diverse cultures and backgrounds and it is advantageous to retain a variety of institutional forms and arrangements for the present – from formal national representative bodies to informal networks. The MCB's vision has never been to duplicate, supplant or belittle existing work or to seek to become the sole rallying point. It endeavours to promote good practice throughout the community and co-ordinate work where necessary.

Membership of the MCB

Membership is open to any organisation based in the UK whose activities are primarily for the benefit of Muslims of Britain, or which operates from Britain with staff drawn from Britain for the benefit of the Muslim *ummah*. No organisation is eligible for membership unless its own membership is open only to those who profess the Muslim faith.

The MCB has three types of affiliated bodies – national, regional and local. A ‘national’ body is one that has branches across the UK; a ‘regional’ body is one with branches in one or more counties, or an association or council of mosques operating with a town or city. ‘Local’ or specialist bodies are typically mosques, Islamic centres, charities, schools and similar institutions at one location. The annual affiliation fees vary depending on membership type (£100 for national bodies, £50 for regional bodies, £25 for local bodies).

Each affiliate is assigned to a geographical zone within the UK. The MCB has defined 12 zones, largely based on postcode boundaries and to ensure an even distribution of members within each zone (See Box III).

BOX III

MCB Zones and membership distribution

South London & Southern England	44
North London, Beds. & Cambridge	46
West & Central London, West & South West	35
East London, Essex & Norfolk	42
East Midlands (Incl Notts & Derbyshire)	27
West Midlands	39
Merseyside, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale	30
Preston, Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley	31
Yorkshire & North East	34
Northern Ireland	1
Scotland	12
Wales	5

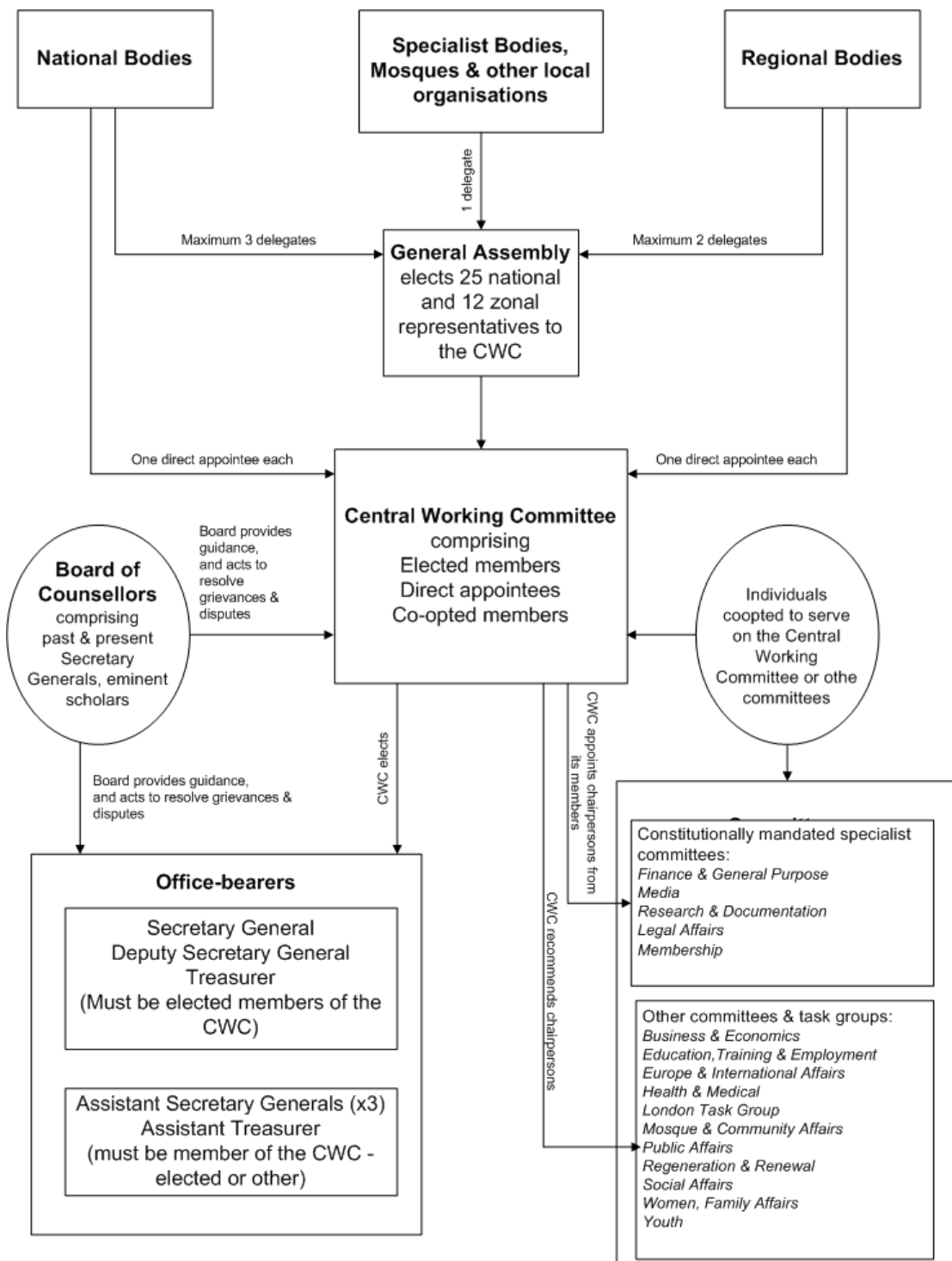
The intention of the zonal boundaries is to ensure each region of Britain has a voice within the MCB and encourage the devolution of MCB work.

The MCB maintains regular communication with affiliates, through its newsletter, *The Common Good*, circulars and information packs. An example is the pack sent to affiliates in the aftermath of September 11, providing guidelines from *ulema* and other information for use at a local level. Affiliates are also notified of, and invited to, events organised by the MCB.

Structure of the MCB

The decision-making and ruling body of the MCB is its General Assembly that must meet at least once a year. The Assembly is comprised of delegates from affiliated bodies. The other organisational units within the MCB are a Central Working Committee (CWC), various specialist committees and task groups, and a Board of Counsellors. Their interaction is illustrated in the diagram – *Structure of the MCB*

Structure of the MCB



Every two years, the General Assembly meets to elect members of the Central Working Committee (CWC). Twenty-five delegates are elected as 'national representatives'. Each zone then elects one 'zonal representative'. There are thus 37 elected members on the CWC. The elections are based on a three-stage process (see Box IV).

BOX IV

Election Process for the Central Working Committee

Stage 1 – Before the Annual General Meeting

- Eight weeks before the AGM, affiliates are provided with delegate forms. The number of delegates from an affiliate depends on its membership type.
- Based on the returned forms, a 'List of Appointed Delegates' is prepared centrally, and sent to all delegates four weeks before the AGM. Nomination forms are also provided to each delegate for their choice of nationally and zonally elected representatives. Each delegate may nominate upto three national representatives and one zonal representative from the 'List of Appointed Delegates'. The zonal representative must be from the same zone as the delegate making the nomination.
- Candidates are invited to provide their personal profile so that this can be circulated to delegates

Stage 2 – At the AGM – National representatives

- Each delegate is provided (i) a ballot paper with a list of candidates standing as national representatives (ii) a ballot paper with a list of candidates standing as zonal representatives in the delegate's zone
- Each delegate completes the national ballot paper by selecting upto 25 names
- The top twenty five delegates are declared elected as national representatives

Stage 3 – At the AGM – Zonal representatives

- The zonal ballot papers are updated to remove any persons who have been elected as national representatives
- Each delegate selects one name from the zonal ballot paper
- The person with most votes in that zone is declared as zonal representative – a total of 15 zonal representatives are elected

Additionally, each national and regional affiliate can make a direct appointee to the CWC.

The CWC elects a number of office-bearers for a two-year term. The office-bearers elected at the Fifth General Assembly meeting on April 28 2002 were Iqbal Sacranie, an accountant, as Secretary General; Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, a physics teacher, as Deputy Secretary General; and Ali Omar Ermes, an artist, as Treasurer. Four additional office-bearers are elected at a subsequent meeting of the CWC. The chief spokesperson of the MCB is its Secretary General. Office-bearers cannot serve the same position for more than two consecutive terms or four years.

The CWC is responsible to the General Assembly for the efficient and proper running of the MCB, for carrying out the policies laid down by the General Assembly and for taking initiatives that are consistent with the General Assembly's policies in the best interests of the Muslim community of Britain. The last General Assembly meeting for example passed two resolutions that would need to be implemented by the CWC (see Box V).

BOX V

MCB General Assembly Resolutions, April 2002 – Two examples

- The MCB must help ensure that the needs and ideas of young people are effectively addressed both in its own activities and that of its affiliates through greater representation and participation of young people
- The MCB must help ensure that Muslim institutions, including mosques, *madrassahs* and schools, become stronger and more effective at serving the community by promoting reform and good management.

In previous years the CWC has been chaired by the Secretary General but in interests of impartiality and workload sharing, different chairpersons are now appointed to conduct meetings.

The MCB has instituted a number of checks and balances to preserve its representative and democratic character:

- Only the elected members of the CWC are eligible for the three senior office-bearer posts of Secretary General, Deputy Secretary General and Treasurer.
- The total number of elected members from any one 'grouping' – say a 'national' affiliate and its branches that may be MCB affiliates in their own right - to the Central Working Committee cannot exceed five. This is to prevent any single tendency taking control of the MCB and sidelining other points of view.
- the total number of elected members of the CWC must always exceed the number of direct appointees from national and regional bodies.
- On the AGM's instructions, the CWC is now instructed to coopt persons in a manner that "reflects the diversity of thought, background and gender" of Muslims in Britain. These co-opted persons will also be eligible to become office-bearers (the three posts of assistant Secretary General and one post of assistant Treasurer).

The MCB's Constitution and the Standing Orders place a duty upon the office bearers and the Central Working Committee to appoint an independent and impartial person as election commissioner six months in advance of the election process. The commissioner is empowered to act wholly

independently of the Central Working Committee and the office bearers in the implementation and supervision of complex but essential election procedures. The office bearers, past or present, have no involvement with the election process.

Each year, the Secretary General and Treasurer are required to submit reports to the General Assembly at which there is time devoted to the scrutiny and assessment of MCB performance. Though much needs to be done to make the organisation more effective and focussed, there is a framework in place to ensure accountability and receive feedback.

Much of the work of the MCB is undertaken at committee level. There are five constitutionally mandated committees that must be chaired by a member of the Central Working Committee. The chair of the Finance & General Purpose Committee is the Treasurer. The chairs of the other constitutionally mandated Committees (Media, Research & Development, Membership and Legal Affairs) are appointed by the CWC. Other committees appoint their own chairs, vice-chairs and secretaries. This committee structure provides an avenue for individuals to participate and contribute their skills and talents. Thus while the MCB membership is not open to individuals – affiliates are corporate bodies – individuals with special interests, talents and skills have always been welcomed to contribute to the work and programmes of the MCB through cooption to the CWC, participation in the work of committees, or helping out with various tasks.

The MCB's Board of Counsellors serve as an advisory body, comprising experts in Shari'ah and other Muslims of standing in the community who have achieved distinction in other fields. The Board serves as a sounding board for the office bearers and the CWC, and has been given responsibility to investigate and resolve disputes and grievances when these arise. The present members include past and present MCB Secretary Generals, Professor Dawud Noibi, Professor Khurshid Ahmed, Maulana Yusuf Motala, Dr Ali Mughram Al-Ghamdi and Lord Adam Patel. The Board appoints its own convenor and secretary and members can attend the meetings of the CWC as observers. The Board should meet at least twice a year.

The MCB has an administrative office based in London, with a small team of salaried staff and a media desk. The office-bearers and committee members work on an honorary and voluntary basis.

The community is already seeing the benefits of creating a broad-based, representative and inclusive institution, though there is no room for complacency (see Box VI) for some contributions that the MCB has been able to make, *alhamdu lillah*). A tremendous amount of work needs to be done if British Muslims are to survive with dignity and contribute to social reform and welfare in the wider society.

The MCB Charitable Foundation (MCBCF) is an independent entity registered with the Charities Commissioners. It is aiming to build a capital fund through which activities of the MCB that are exclusively charitable can be supported.

The MCBCF is entitled to tax rebates on donations received from UK tax payers.

Additionally, donations can be made directly to the MCB to support its operating expenses, or specifically to a project.

How can you help?

Your talents and skills, your time, your contacts and your financial assistance are all greatly needed to continue the wide-ranging work of this active and forward-looking organisation.

Further details can be obtained from the MCB office: MCB, P O Box 52, Wembley, Middlesex, HA9 OXW, or the MCB web site <http://www.mcb.org.uk>

Compiled by the Research & Documentation Committee of the MCB

BOX VI

Examples of MCB's work

Campaign work, lobbying, representation at the political level

Lobbying efforts for changes to legislation

- for inclusion of the religion question in the 2001 Census
- for promotion of family values in debates relating to family life (Section 28 etc)
- for addressing religious discrimination, incitement to religious hatred and vilification

Formal responses to White Papers and consultation documents

- Commission for Racial Equality's Third Review of the Race Relations Act
- Submission to Home Affairs Select Committee on anti-terrorism (2001) – the MCB was opposed to the hasty compilation of the list of proscribed bodies; evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Religious Offences (2002), participation in the independent review group on coroner services and death certification (2002)
- Financial bonds for visitors

Engagement in the political process through

- preparation of the policy paper 'Electing to Listen' and a 'Muslim Vote Card' in the run-up to the 2001 General Election
- 'round table' meetings with policy makers of the major parties to convey issues of concern
- statistical analysis of Muslim electoral strength in marginal constituencies and the provision of this information to local Muslim bodies

Getting the Muslim viewpoint heard

- using opportunities to express to appropriate ministers and senior civil servants the community's views on issues of the day – including opposition to the war on Iraq, the illegal detention in Guantanamo Bay, bombings in Afghanistan, and domestic policy issues such as youth alienation and community deprivation
- receptions for leading political figures in order to convey the contribution British Muslims make to society and their concerns - PM Blair (1999), Home Secretary Straw (1998), Foreign office minister Hain (1999), Opposition leader Hague (March 2001); seminars for senior civil servants
- issuing press releases on matters affecting the British Muslim community – 37 press releases have been prepared since January 2002, covering a range of topics from faith schools and the BSE scare to international crises

Media action and representation

Responding to misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam

- the MCB has extracted apologies and retractions from the BBC, Sky News, book publishers for inappropriate and inaccurate statements and use of terminology such as 'Islamic terrorism' – 34 letters to editors or producers have been sent since January 2002.

Establishing contact with the media and related bodies

- regular meetings with editors – recent meetings with the BBC, The Times, The Independent – raising issues of media misrepresentation and the harm done from crude stereotyping
- participation in media seminars and workshops with other journalists and line of contact with the Press Complaints Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission

Responding to media enquiries – the MCB at all times seeks to

- ensure that the Muslim representation at interviews and panel discussions is competent and well-informed
- support good practice initiatives – the MCB supported the BBC Islam UK season 2002 and the production of the accompanying official BBC booklet

Community services

Representation on working parties relating to

- burial facilities, post mortems and coroners' procedures
- hospital chaplaincy
- welfare of Muslim prisoners

Promoting capacity building and growth of community bodies through

- advice and consultancy for access to regeneration funding – through this work MCB affiliates have secured over £300,000 for local initiatives
- providing letters of support & backing to Islamic projects facing planning obstacles e.g. Southall, Oxford, East London

Increasing community awareness and networking through

- publication of a fortnightly e-newsletter and the periodic printed newsletter 'The Common'
- annual general meetings attended by affiliates that debate issues of concern. The 2003 AGM will focus on the role of mosques
- poster campaigns on issues of concern - Hajj health issues, Census 2001 participation
- Maintenance of a web site (www.mcb.org.uk) that is now a widely used resource not just by students and journalists for information on the community but also by Government departments seeking statistical data

Providing services to the community through

- acting as a referral point to large number of public enquiries on issues ranging from Muslim adoption to fiqh questions
- financial support and medical expertise to the British Hajj delegation

September 11 & aftermath

- Prompt and effective representation of the views of the majority of the community through press releases, press conferences and meetings
- The MCB convened a meeting of ulema so that they may provide advice and guidance to the community
- Preparation of guidelines for the community on issues relating to post-September 11 Islamophobia
- Publication of 'The Quest for Sanity – Reflections on September 11 and the aftermath' in September 2002 to present Islam's positive message of peace and justice

Research

- 1.Collection of a range of Muslim community statistics published on the MCB web site for use by researchers
- 2.Collaboration with the University of Bristol on a research project on the religion question on the 2001 Census; a conference on Muslim demographics convened