

## **Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh**

**March 2015 Bulletin 51**

### Key Dates

- 1<sup>st</sup> March 2015 Spokesperson and Head of Operations participated in the first of the monthly update programmes designated to Sikh Council UK by Akaal Channel TV
- 5<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Representatives of Sikh Council UK attended an event organised by Department of Communities and Local Government, 'The Victoria Cross Commemorative Stones Project, Service of Remembrance of Victoria Cross recipients from the First World War'. A representative attending the event from the Sikh National Museum, Derby was asked to speak to introduce VIP guests in attendance.
- 9<sup>th</sup> March 2015: As one of the first of its kind a roundtable discussion meeting took place between the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and Sikh representatives at their request to discuss issues of concern to the Sikh Community. The agenda of the meeting included the following:
  1. Integration and Faith Updates
  2. Hate Crime/Misplaced anti-Muslim Hatred
  3. Discussion with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office
  4. Any other concerns
  5. How Government and Sikh groups can work better together
- 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015: A follow up meeting with DCLG to discuss Child Sexual Exploitation concerns was attended by the Chair of Community Safety along with representatives from other Sikh organisations.
- 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015: Representatives of Sikh Council UK attended a national event to commemorate the centenary of the second battle of Neuve Chappelle organised by The Undivided Indian Ex-Servicemens' Association. The event was addressed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport as well as other prominent Ministers.
- 7<sup>th</sup> March 2015: A meeting of the Board of Jathedars took place at Ramgarhia Sabha, Milton Keynes.
- 24<sup>th</sup> March 2015: Representatives of Sikh Council UK met with a newly appointed Coroner in North Yorkshire following a request to make local links as part of an introductory meeting.
- 25<sup>th</sup> March 2015: Representatives of Sikh Council UK attended the Vaisakhi in Parliament event organised by British Sikh Consultative Forum (BSCF) in liaison with All Party Parliamentary Group for British Sikhs and hosted by the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Secretary General was one of the speakers at the event.

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- 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015: The Secretary General and Gurdwara representatives met with senior officials of the Home Office to explore ways of overcoming issues relating to sponsorship of Kirtania / Ragis from India.

## Key Issues

### **Sikh Free Schools**

Sikh Council UK welcomes the increase of publicly funded Sikh Free schools across the country and appreciates the dedication and hard work of individuals and communities in bringing these about. Sikh Council UK has been contacted by a number of local groups who were due to open schools in September 2015 with information that due to the Education Funding Agency (EFA) not procuring sites in good time the opening of the schools have been deferred for a year. Sikh Council UK is aware of five such cases across the UK.

This is clearly a big disappointment for local communities and the teams behind the bids not least because procuring the site is a responsibility of the EFA - an agency of the Department for Education (DfE).

Sikh Council UK has written to the Secretary of State and Minister of State at the DfE to express our concerns about the delays in signing funding agreements with Akaal Primary School, Derby and the Seva Secondary School, Coventry. Response received indicates that on satisfying additional conditions the Seva Secondary School funding agreement could be signed for September 2015 opening but the Akaal Primary School, Derby still requires securing of a permanent site first.

### **Royal Assent for the Deregulation Bill**

Amendments to existing employment laws that enables Sikhs to wear turbans in all workplaces has been approved by Parliament and received Royal Assent.

This follows a successful campaign by Sikh Council UK and other Sikh groups to address a loophole in the law, which led to turban-wearers facing discrimination in the workplace. Employment laws had exempted turban wearers from the requirement to wear a safety helmet on construction sites since 1989. But the exemption did not apply to less hazardous environments, such as factories and warehouses.

The Employment Act 1989 effectively created an anomaly which allowed Sikhs to wear turbans, in place of safety helmets, in environments where there was a high risk of head injuries, but the exemption did not extend to relatively safer environments. The rules led to a number of cases where Sikhs faced disciplinary hearings and were dismissed from longstanding employment for their refusal to remove their turban and wear a safety helmet.

An amendment to extend the exemption in the Employment Act was introduced to the Deregulation Bill last year, following lobbying by Sikh groups. A long campaign has enabled a vital change in the law. This will make a real difference to Sikhs in the UK by increasing the number of workplaces that members of the community can work in whilst maintaining their religiously mandated identity.

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There will still be limited exceptions where safety helmets will be required, such as for specific roles in the armed forces and emergency response situations.

### **Meeting with SGPC**

20<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Sikh Council UK Administrative Secretary and Spokesperson took advantage of an opportunity that arose to meet with SGPC President, S. Avtar Singh Makhar with guidance from the Secretary General as to topic areas prior to the meeting.

This came about during their unrelated private visits in Panjab through personal contacts. During the meeting the structure and work of Sikh Council UK was introduced to SGPC. Some aspects of the discussion included:

[1] The desirability of SGPC (and other historical Sikh Institutions) to understand and acknowledge the great deal of good work being carried out across the world by Sikh organisations in a variety of fields. To demonstrate this details were given of SCUUK work including specifically the legislation for exemption for turban wearing Sikhs from having to wear safety helmets in workplaces but also the casework regularly engaged in, the mixed marriages guidance, the work of the various sub committees etc. Also detailed were some other Sikh organisations and the work they are carrying out in the UK including Khalsa Aid, Sikh schools etc.

[2] The desirability for SGPC (and other historical Sikh Institutions) to support the work carried out by SCUUK and others and to respect that in the UK, Sikh related issues will be led on by UK based Sikh organisations including SCUUK.

[3] That SCUUK can be available as a resource to advice and research on Sikh related issues in relation to the UK.

The representatives also took the opportunity to thank S. Avtar Singh Makhar for the assistance the SGPC provided to Bhai Inderjit Singh during his trip to India to examine the issue of Sikh prisoners. A short discussion was held on the issue of Sikh prisoners.

Since their return it has come to the attention of the Sikh Council UK that there have been reports in some media that the representatives requested S. Avtar Singh Makhar to establish 'International Sikh Centre' in other countries similar to that being established by SGPC in USA. This is not true - no such conversation took place during the meeting nor were either of the representatives aware of any such centre being established in the USA or elsewhere. In any event this matter has not been discussed within the Sikh Council UK to pros and cons of such centres for the diaspora Sikh community. It is clearly the case that the UK Sikh community would be best placed to determine local needs in light of the culture and politics of the host country.

## **Local Roadshow Events**

Sikh Council UK is holding a series of roadshow meetings across UK in engaging with local Sangat, residents, business people, parbhandhaks and its members in each area on a range of topics including:

- local aspirations for the next 10 years for British Sikhs
- Community Safety issues including protection of Sikh Identity
- Raising the British Sikh profile in the community and in government led establishments
- Enhancing political engagement to influence change
- Voter Registration prior to the General Election
- Other issues of importance to the participants.....

The following meetings have taken place during March 2015:

- Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Ramgahria Sabha Milton Keynes
- Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Singh Sabha Gurdwara Nottingham
- Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Gurdwara Guru Arjan Dev Ji Derby
- Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015, Guru Tegh Bahadur Gurdwara Leicester
- Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2015, Guru Har Rai Gurdwara, West Bromwich
- Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2015 Guru Nanak Gurdwara Smethwick
- Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2015, Guru Granth Sahib Sabha Gurdwara, Glasgow
- Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015 Gurdwara Singh Sabha, Glasgow

Thus far the meetings have been constructive and very informative. The aim is for Sikh Council UK to visit 30 towns by end of June 2015.

## **Voter Registration**

As part of the Sikh Council UK theme of work 'Building the Sikh Vote and Influence', Sikh Council UK has launched a voter registration drive prior to the General Election.

Following changes in voter registration procedures to individual registration, it has been estimated that in excess of 15% of voters are no longer on the voter register in some areas. The impact is worse within ethnic minority communities and amongst young people.

The Electoral Commission has funded publicity material which is being circulated to Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations. Voter Registration has formed a key element of the local roadshow events.

Copies of publicity materials is attached.