

BUILDING BRIDGES

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By Sarah Jones

If new plans to build an independent Muslim-only school in Southampton are approved, it will be the first of its kind to be built south of London. SARAH JONES visited one of England's few Muslim schools to find out what Southampton can expect. What she discovered may surprise you

BASHING out emails to any Muslim primary school in London I could find, I have to admit I wasn't too hopeful of a response.

What I wanted was clear – a visit to their school ASAP – but what was in it for them?

The proposed new school in faraway Southampton would mean little to them and head teachers are busy people.

My email could easily be ignored in favour of far more pressing matters. And no one can ignore the fact that it's not the easiest of PR jobs to sell an Islamic school in the current political climate. I never heard from the first six schools I emailed. But just five minutes after sending the seventh, a reply dropped into my inbox. "I am really glad that you have contacted us and that you want

to write about our school. We are at present involved in many exciting projects, which would certainly be worth writing about! Please let me know of the dates that would suit you to come in and I am sure we can arrange something."



And ten minutes later, the acting head at Noor Ul Islam Primary School in Leyton, east London, was phoning me to repeat her kind invitation. She was certain their schedule could be cleared and we could come whenever we wanted.

Sure enough, just a few days later, a photographer and myself set off for Leyton to find out more about the school and what one would mean for Southampton.

I had been sent a protocol list by the school, and read it aloud to the photographer as we crawled along the motorway.

Designed to avoid any awkward moments, it outlined Islamic social etiquette followed at the school and didn't take long to read. Men should only shake the hands of other men, and likewise for females. Modest dress was required. Men and women may

be segregated in certain parts of the building, and weren't free to socialise with the opposite sex. The prayer area was to be kept clean and shoes should be removed, and it was vital to remain silent if you were present when the Qur'an was

being recited.

Arriving three hours later around lunchtime, we found the school tucked away on a quiet street, small and unassuming from the outside.

Inside it was quite a different story. Receiving a warm welcome from acting head Rookshana Adam and her deputy Halima Rangrej, the school was buzzing with activity. As children streamed through the hall, there was excited, happy chatter, with many offering us a polite hello or a wave.

All the usual subjects are taught here but the timetable also carries daily lessons in Islamic studies, which includes reading the Qur'an and learning Arabic. This saves the children having to do this work after school. All the subjects at this independent primary are taught in English,

and boys and girls are educated together.

In the school hall – where twice daily prayers take place – the walls are decorated with brightly coloured displays about healthy eating and snowflakes, and a bookcase groans with copies of Roald Dahl favourites and The Demon Headmaster.

Run by a charitable Islamic trust, parents pay fees of £2,500 a year to send their child here. With 156 pupils on its roll and 30 staff, Noor Ul Islam Primary School is something of a success story.

Opening its doors for the first time back in 2001 with just 96 pupils, today it boasts a huge waiting list of more than 300 children.

It's not rocket science why Muslim parents are desperate to send their children here. Along with small class sizes, glowing Ofsted reports and excellent SATS results, the school offers an all-round education in an Islamic setting.



- There are 129 full-time Muslim schools in England, according to the Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- This figure includes 118 independent schools, just under half of which are for primary age children.
- There are currently no Muslim schools south of Greater London.
- All Muslim schools – whether state funded or independent – are subject to Ofsted inspections.
- State Muslim schools must follow the National Curriculum. Independent Muslim schools do not have to do the same, but the Association of Muslim Schools says most do.

All the usual National Curriculum subjects are taught here. “We want them to excel and do well,” says the acting deputy. “If you take anything away from the National Curriculum it would disadvantage them, especially when it came to sitting their GCSEs. Many of our children won’t go on to Islamic secondary schools because there aren’t enough places available.”

Forging strong links with the local community, staff are keen to ensure their pupils do not live in a segregated Islamic bubble. One of their key aims, after all, is to encourage pupils to be good citizens and make a positive contribution to society.

“ A Muslim school will be new to Southampton so there may be apprehension.

Halima Rangrej,
deputy head,
Noor Ul Islam Primary School

Community cohesion is close to their hearts. “We want them to be part of what’s around them,” says Mrs Adam. So Noor Ul Islam Primary aims to work closely with their local authority and has strong links with other local schools.

The children are currently raising money for their local hospital and have even adopted a local flowerbed.

The school also operates a strict parking policy to ensure parents collecting their children are considerate to their neighbours.

Fostering a sense of Britishness too is important – these children are British Muslims after all – and this is

covered in citizenship lessons.

The children also go on regular school trips – the beach, the ice rink and a forest are all recent favourites.

Despite the current political climate, staff say they have never experienced any negativity towards the school.

So what is the secret of this wider success?

Two words – openness and transparency.

The school has always opened its doors and welcomed outsiders, as I witnessed first-hand.

“It’s about working with people in the community and reassuring them,” says Mrs Rangrej.

“A Muslim school will be very new to Southampton and so there may be apprehension.

“It’s important to be open and transparent. People do have preconceptions concerning what Islamic schools are about and what the curriculum will be.

“The fact we teach the National Curriculum has been news for some people in the past. We have had visitors come in before and say, ‘wow this is a real school’. It’s quite comical but nobody out there



knows what's going on inside. It's about opening your doors and making people feel welcome. This is just another school."

Of course, somewhere like Leyton has a much larger Muslim population than Southampton. The 2001 census showed that 15.1 per cent of

wider non-Muslim community. There's the financial benefit for a start. Mrs Adam estimates their school saves the local authority in the region of £3,500 per child by educating them independently.

Then the high standard of education and emphasis on Islamic manners taught in the

"If the school in Southampton gets the right team onboard, success is there for them."

If the Leyton experience does come to Southampton there are, of course, obvious benefits for the Islamic community.

But perhaps surprisingly,

Transparency and openness are key to success

residents of Waltham Forest (the borough which includes Leyton) were Muslim. These figures meant they had the third

school, which they say will ensure pupils will grow up to become valued citizens.

Struck by just how happy

there will be plenty of positives available to the wider community too.

If Noor Ul Islam Primary's genuine openness and willingness to engage is adopted 90 miles down the motorway, it would be a valuable lesson learnt.

And such a refreshing ethos could have a positive effect far beyond the school walls.



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largest Muslim population in London and the fifth largest in the country. Southampton's comparable figures – 1.9 per cent of the population were Muslim, rising to as high as 11.8 per cent in the city centre Bevois ward – are pretty small fry next to that.

So will Southampton's potential Muslim school encounter any additional challenges as a result?

These ladies don't think so – as long as they remain as open as possible.

There are, they say, so many positives of such a school opening in Southampton for the



and polite the children at Noor Ul Islam Primary seem to be, it would also be hard to find a head teacher who radiates more positivity than Mrs Adam.