

Islamia Primary School Brent delays it again.

The founders of the Islamia Primary School have accused Brent Council of attempting to delay the establishment of the first voluntary aided Muslim school in the country. **Hasnain Walji** traces the trials and tribulations in their long running quest to achieve the coveted status.

The governors of the Islamia Primary School in the London Borough of Brent continue to wrestle with the Brent Council in their bid to acquire a voluntary aided status for the school. In the meanwhile the Secretary of State Mr. Kenneth Baker, who has the application from the school, is awaiting the results of a planning application before making his decision. If and when the voluntary aided status is granted the Islamia Primary school will make history as the first Muslim school to have such a status in common with thousands of Christian and Jewish denominational schools in the United Kingdom. The Borough of Brent has no less than 22 such schools, 19 Christian and three Jewish.

In accordance with the 1944 education act, which allows the establishment of denominational schools, the local authority would be required to fund 85 percent of the running costs in addition to paying teachers salaries. However as the founders of the school, the Islamic Circle Organisation, headed by Yusuf Islam have found that the theory and the application of the act have between them many deviations and distractions.

The school was established in 1982 to cater for the children of nearly 20,000 Muslims living in the borough. Established as a nursery school, it has grown to a full primary school which can educate children up to the age of 11 and aims at preparing pupils for the Common Entrance Examinations. What is different about Islamia primary is the fact that a significant part of the curriculum is devoted towards educating children with a thorough understanding of the Islam as a living faith, instilling Islamic values as well as religious instruction. The only other language taught, to children who come from a wide variety of Muslim countries and backgrounds, is Arabic. Between the teachers and pupils there are 22 nationalities giving the school, a truly international character. The rest of the subjects taught are no different

to the lessons in any primary school in the country, except subjects like geography and history offer an Islamic perspective.

At the outset one of the difficulties envisaged by the founders in their attempts to acquire voluntary aided status was to actually decipher the Education Act and establish the number of stages the application would have to go through before its eventual approval. It was to that end that the first letter of initial inquiry was sent to Brent Borough Council in June 1984 to seek guidance from the council. What followed was a typical demonstration of the delaying tactics in the true traditions of the local authorities. Each time the school administration furnished the local council with the information requested, the local council came up with requests for further information to be presented at its next meeting some weeks later. The frustration led the Board of Governors to write to the Director of Education stating that 'the department had not provided us with enough information and advise on how to go about things and this we can only imagine is due to a lack of goodwill and downright discrimination'.

Over a period of time, many reports and meetings later, the school governors were able to demonstrate to the authorities that no further grounds remained for them to refuse the application. The criteria of adequate funding, the demand for the school and the satisfactory curriculum, syllabus and the qualification of teachers were all met. At last the Education Committee at its meeting on 4th March 1986 (two years after the initial inquiry) gave its unequivocal support to the application. An overjoyed Yusuf Islam commented, 'We are highly delighted with the committee's decision. We hope that Brent will set the trend for other multi-religious, multicultural boroughs in the country, Brent Council is proving that it intends to live up to its declared policy

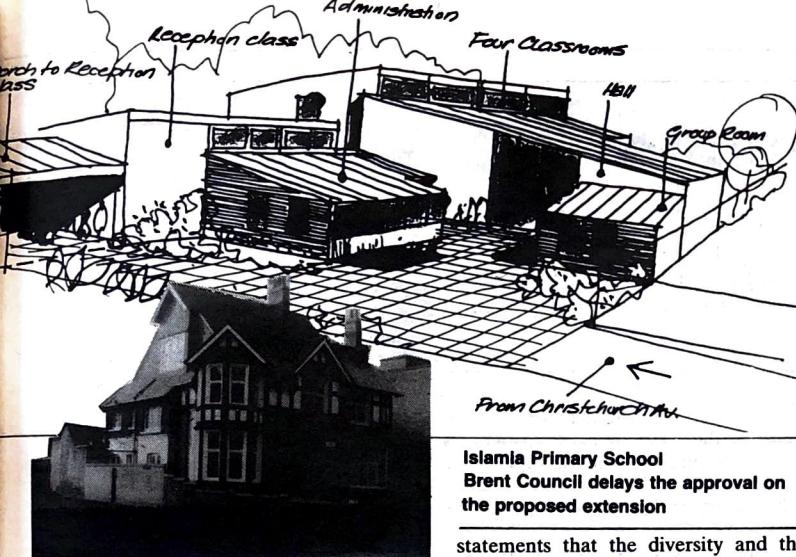
of equal treatment for all. This is happening, not through some naive ideological dream as proposed by the Swann report, but by practical and tangible steps, using the existing facilities of the law, in order to provide for the educational needs of minorities in this country.'

On 9th of April 1986, at the full meeting of the Brent Council, the delegation of school governors reminded the committee to be 'positive and live up to your declared policy of equal treatment for all.' Whether it was the timely reminder or the vote catching fervour, in the event, following a lively debate, the vote was 10 to 1 in favour of supporting the school, with Conservatives, Liberals, and some independents (including representatives of the Church, Jewish groups and Brent Community Relations Council) voting for the proposal. The Labour Group abstained after attempting to delay the decision yet again stating that it would be in the interest of the school!!

One of the key actors in the saga has been Ron Anderson, the head of the Education Committee who contends that the Labour Party does not see a problem in voluntary aided Muslim schools but has reservations about Islamia Primary in particular. The Labour Group, who now control the council are in a quandary; caught between their present policy of abolishing all denominational schools and their stated commitment to uphold the rights of minority groups.

There is also opposition from some local Muslim leaders who are aligned to the Labour Party who feel that the school cannot serve the needs of all local Muslims and favours the Labour charter, a document drawn by the Labour Party to give a better deal to Muslims in state schools.

It appears that Yusuf Islam's euphoria was shortlived because the delays that have dogged the school's application from the beginning have surfaced yet again. The latest twist is



**Islamia Primary School
Brent Council delays the approval on
the proposed extension**

statements that the diversity and the subsequent wider range of parental preference accorded by denominational schools is welcome, there are underlying factors that disturb the education policy makers.

Firstly there is the common complaint directed at denominational schools, not only for Muslim but also Jewish and some Christian groups, that the emphasis on the teaching of the holy scriptures and their interpretations are not compatible with the secular British society. Some educationalists suggest that it is not viable to establish Muslim schools given the fact that the West has a long tradition of separation of the secular and religious not just in schools but in wider society as well. In Islam, no such separation can exist. Therefore pupils in Muslim schools would be ill prepared for life in a secular, materialistic and a highly competitive society. What is not admitted as candidly, however, is that the planners are actually worried about the effects of teaching subjects like history and geography from an Islamic perspective.

The findings of the Swann Committee inquiry into multi-ethnic education duly reflected these views resulting in the recommendation that separate schools was 'not the way forward'. In fact it went on as far as recommending that the government review the 1944 act which allows for the establishment of denominational schools: 'to see whether or not alterations are required in a society that is now *very different*'. It is obvious that the Swann report will have considerable influence upon local authorities which have larger concentration of ethnic minorities in responding to their demands for special educational needs.

What the Swann report meant by *different society* renders itself to many interpretations. Judging from the ac-

tions of Brent and similar boroughs elsewhere in the United Kingdom, it would appear that their apprehension stems from the fact that in the multi-cultural and multi-racial society in Britain today separate Muslim schools are seen as threat to the culture of the host community as opposed to the Jewish and Christian denominational schools which do not appear to cause any concern.

Notwithstanding the vagaries of local authorities and politicians, the most significant aspect of the Islamia Primary's aided status approval (or otherwise) will have a profound impact on the U.K. educational scene in paving a way for Muslims in other areas towards the establishment of separate schools for Muslims. The increasing cultural awareness and the realisation of the political clout Muslims wield has of late resulted in more and more people demanding their rights in line with other religious groups. The practice of education in state schools is seen by Muslims to be at variance with their values and beliefs. Until now, traditional means have been used to make up for what the parents perceive as a gap in the education system, by way of Sunday *madrasas* and other supplementary classes. Lack of resources both financial and educational methods and materials compare unfavourably with the state system. It is now believed that the exercise proves too taxing for the children. What is even more important is the separation of 'secular' and 'religious' education crystallises the split in the minds of the children from a very early age which will inevitably lead to have a detrimental effect in the child's future development.

To date the founders of Islamia Primary and others who have attempted to acquire voluntary aided status have done so singly and individually. What is now required is for the Muslim Community to coordinate and pool their resources and experience to minimise the delays and frustrations and adopt an institutionalised approach in demanding a better deal for their children.

In the meanwhile it remains to be seen whether Brent Council approves the planning application later this month to enable Mr. Kenneth Baker to grant the long awaited voluntary aided status to Islamia Primary or delay the application further in the hope that the patrons run out of steam or more important out of funds and be forced to close the school. ■