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## Most Impactful Imam Nomination

I would like to nominate Sheikh Fazle Abbas Dato, Imam /Resident Alim of Wessex Jamaat (Al Mahdi Centre), for the above award due to the great impact he has had both within the community and in engaging other local communities, groups and services. Further information on his various activities and their impact has been detailed below.

As the Imam /Resident Alim of Al Mahdi Centre, Sheikh Fazle Abbas has passionately gone beyond the traditional role expected of an Imam serving the 3M's of an Islamic Centre i.e. the Mihrab, Minbar and Madrasah. He radiates a powerful message that as citizens in Britain, our home, we are able to devotedly live the faith of Islam.

Within the community Sheikh Fazle Abbas leads the various salah prayers including the Eidayn and weekly Salaatul Jumu'ah. In addition to advising for taqwa and motivating towards living Islam, the sermons by Sheikh Fazle Abbas regularly address local events and contemporary issues affecting the Ummah. The sermon topics range from current affairs of Muslims globally, Islamophobia, participating in elections, government consultations such as same sex marriage, introduction of Sexual and Relationship Education. A typical example is that the last Friday Jumah Khutba included remembrance of 23rd anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, Beyond this, he delivers an average of one sermon every fortnight.

In this digital age Sheikh Fazle Abbas has maintained a significant presence on our home page and social media platforms including face book. He has been able to sustain the fortnightly publication of Risalatul Jum'ah -the Friday Message-broadcast to the community. The latest issue No 131 for the month of Dhulq'adah dwelled on the sanctity of Ashhurul Hurum- the sacred months- and promoting peace.

<https://www.almahdi.org.uk/our-community/the-friday-message/1291-the-friday-message-issue-no-311-promoting-peace>

He also runs regular Quran Study Circles for adults, leads the dua /Amaal programmes in the month of Ramadhan. He has always been willing to receive feedback and engage in discussions with male and female, young or old.

Sheikh Fazle Abbas has taken over the role of director of the Madrasah, for which he has overseen a major transition to a new curriculum, known as the Tarbiyah curriculum. This is a curriculum that has been developed for use by Madaris all over the world and includes student manuals, story books, activities and teaching guides. As a pioneer, Sheikh Fazle Abbas, as the Madrasah director, ensured that Wessex Jamaat Madrasah was the first Madrasah globally to adopt this new curriculum (as a pilot scheme) and has instituted a framework by which feedback is provided from both students and teachers for every lesson that is taught under the new curriculum.



In this way, he has been working with the curriculum developers to further develop and improve the curriculum. The Tarbiyah curriculum has since been adopted by several other Madaris around the country, for implementation in the upcoming academic year. He has also developed the Madrasah by introducing new classes for the youngest students, facilitating teacher training courses and a parent workshop and developing more robust policies for safeguarding (with online training for teachers), data protection, health and safety, admission, attendance and children with special educational needs. Under his leadership, the Madrasah has grown both in size and in the quality of religious education.

Sheikh Fazle Abbas has been a keen advocate of youth engagement and has initiated and sustained several initiatives (beyond the Madrasah) to engage the children of the community. This includes a 'Kumayl Club' for children every Thursday evening at the centre, youth Dua sessions Monday-Wednesdays during the month of Ramadhan, 'Getting to know Allah' competition, Quran Hifdh competitions and Children's Muharram programmes (including craft work, quizzes, speeches and poems in remembrance of Husayn ibn Ali), all of which he has personally led. He has also initiated the 'Al Mahdi Toddlers Club' and continues to provide support for this. He always seeks to capacity build the youth by encouraging them to take the lead on community projects such as charitable campaigns with his support (e.g. food drives, charitable drives etc).

As a strong advocate of Prophetic tradition of Silatul Qulub- linking the hearts- Sheikh Fazle Abbas provides leadership towards promoting brotherhood, harmony and support in the community. By knowing everyone by their names in the community, irrespective of one's age, gender or occupation and constantly looking out for an opportunity to strike a conversation Sheikh Fazle Abbas has made all male and female, young and old be comfortable to refer to him for any advice or pastoral support. He has been able to visit individual families at their homes and listen to their stories of success and challenges. His presence by our side during occasions of happiness or grief makes him part of our family.

As a strong advocate for unity in the Ummah, Sheikh Fazle Abbas has sincerely reached out to developing relations with the Imams of the other mosques in Portsmouth and Southampton. His overarching message is that there is need for all in the community to work together to ensure that sectarianism, radicalism or extremism is not allowed to flourish. This has resulted to the Imams together with members of the congregation visiting each other for Iftar and other events on the Islamic calendar. We have been honoured to be addressed by the Portsmouth Jami mosque Imam on Meeladun Nabi. Likewise, it has been a privilege for Sheikh Fazle Abbas to be a regular speaker at Iftar sessions in Jami Mosque and Portsmouth academy mosque.

Sheikh Fazle Abbas has been regularly invited to take part in interviews on local media stations including the BBC TV, Radio Solent and other Fm stations. He conveys the message that one of the fundamental values of Islam is peace and the Islamic faith is a peaceful religion. On several occasions he has initiated release of press statements condemning the horrifying and shocking terror attacks in UK and Europe. These statements jointly signed by all the local Imams were covered in the local Portsmouth News and Southampton Echo papers.



<https://www.almahdi.org.uk/news/press-releases/957-local-muslim-community-condemns-the-senseless-murder-in-paris->

On the instance of the cartoons and movie insulting our Noble Prophet Muhammad SAWW, Sheikh Fazle Abbas urged peaceful responses. His efforts led to production of a press release from the local leaders of four Christian denominations, and Muslim leaders from mosques and Islamic centres in Fareham and Portsmouth

<https://www.almahdi.org.uk/news/press-releases/618-interfaith-statement-on-religious-images>

Where Sheikh Fazle Abbas has really built a legacy is in the impact he has had in building our relations with the wider community, including local service providers, dignitaries, schools, youth groups, universities and several local faith communities. Due to the networking that Sheikh spends large amounts of time investing in, we continue to regularly host at Al Mahdi centre visitors ranging from the local police force, the Royal Navy, Imams from local mosques, and many interfaith colleagues from Portsmouth cathedral and local churches. Sheikh constantly urges us to engage in conversations with our neighbours so that by knowing each other we are able to break down the barriers and misconceptions all around us. He has developed personal links with the Rt Revd Christopher Foster, Bishop of Portsmouth Diocese who invited him to facilitate a workshop on Interfaith relations at the Portsmouth Diocesan conference for the clergy. Sheikh Fazle Abbas is the first Muslim Imam to have been invited to attend and participate in the whole of the 3 day residential conference.

As a community, interfaith activity has always been a strong suit in that we have a very strong connection with Portsmouth cathedral and host annual joint events there. Where Sheikh has made an even further impact is in arranging visits to the mosque from local schools and youth groups (such as scouts), and he often hosts such groups 2 times per month on average, which forms a great tabligh opportunity. As a mentor he encourages the children and youths to take lead in receiving the guests, responding to their queries and sharing with them their experiences of living as Muslims in the UK. He was also the initiator in the formation of a ladies 'CHaMs' group (pronounced 'chums'), which stands for Christians and Muslims. This group of 6-7 individuals meets regularly to discuss faith issues and has helped to bring the two communities even closer together.

On top of this, Sheikh organises annual visits from several groups, one of the most note-worthy being a group of theology students and lecturers from the University of Chichester. This event, referred to as the 'Know Your Muslim Neighbour' event, promotes round-table small group discussions on a range of issues, which has received overwhelmingly positive feedback. One participant reported that it was a 'life-changing experience' and others have remarked on how it has changed and developed their perspectives on faith and Islam in particular.

Sheikh also represents Shia Islam within Hampshire SACRE and Portsmouth SACRE and is a member of the Chaplaincy Reference Group at the University of Portsmouth and the Chaplaincy Team within Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust.



For a community of approximately 250 members, the heights we have reached as a community, regarding spiritual development, community affairs, youth engagement, Madrasah, interfaith activities and citizenship is fantastic, and this is to a large extent due to the individual work of Sheikh Fazle Abbas Dato. Below are some testimonials that the Jamaat has received from interfaith colleagues. Further testimonials, along with pictures, can be found at <https://www.almahdi.org.uk/news>.

#### Testimonials:

- Revd. Susan Allman, Vicar of St Peter's Church, Titchfield, following a visit by young families from St Peter's Church to the Mosque on 2nd July 2018 :  
"Thanks be to God for a wonderful evening at the Centre and for all the young families God has entrusted to our care. The input from the Imam Sheikh Fazle Abbas and the children at Al Mahdi was perfect. It was very special to see the young people socialising together informally. If only the world were more like this."
- Cub Scout leader Liz Thompson, following a visit from the 1st Whiteley Cubs:  
"Cubs were awarded their World Faith badge by the Imam, Sheikh Fazle Abbas, which was a real honour. Our hosts could not have been more friendly and welcoming - it was an enlightening and fascinating evening which the Cubs and leaders thoroughly enjoyed."
- Letter from the Very Reverend David Brindley, Dean of Portsmouth, on Eid al Fitr 2018: "Dear Sheikh Fazle Abbas, I am sorry that I cannot be with you and your community as you celebrate the Eid ul Fitr festival on Saturday. It is a time of great joy for you as you come to the end of the holy month of Ramadhan and end your fast. I send greetings from the congregation at the Cathedral and pray for you and all your community at this time. It has been a great pleasure for me to see the growing together of our two communities over the years I have been in Portsmouth, and I pray that we may keep in touch over the coming years. May God bless you and all those who will be joining you for the festival. Best wishes, Reverend David Brindley."
- Eid message from Rt Revd. Christopher Foster, Bishop of Portsmouth: "Dear Sheikh Fazle, Eid al Fitr Mubarak, Sawm Maqbul. I am delighted to be able to send my warmest greetings to you and all your community, wishing you peace and the joy of celebrating this holy festival. I continue to pray for you all with thanksgiving for our friendship, and in anticipation of fruitful conversations and companionship in the future, working towards mutual understanding and enrichment, and coming together to foster neighbourliness and openness throughout our communities. Through this time of fasting, prayer, and charitable living, you are an example to the wider community of commitment, devotion, and discipline, and I thank you for that, praying that you have found this to be a time of growth. I, with my wife Sally and colleagues here at Bishopsgrrove, wish you every blessing."
- Fiona Kelly (RE coordinator at St Swithun's Catholic Primary School): "On Monday 6th November St Swithun's Catholic Primary School were lucky to welcome Sheikh Fazle Abbas to speak to Key Stage One as part of our work on world religions. Over the last fortnight, the children have been learning about key Islamic beliefs, in order to broaden their understanding of the faith. Sheikh Fazle Abbas explained the significance of the Qur'an for Muslims to the children and they were very impressed when he read it out in Arabic to them! They



were also very interested in finding out more about the Mosque. The children came away from Sheikh Abbas' session with a real understanding of how Islam promotes peace, acceptance and love. We are very grateful that Sheikh was able to come and share his knowledge with the children and enhance the religious education curriculum at St Swithun's.”