Chair’s Report

I am extremely proud to have been the Chairperson of the Asian Family Counselling Service since 2015. This impressive organisation run by its very dedicated Director, Kulbir Randhawa, and its equally dedicated staff, delivers an invaluable service to the British Asian community. Mental health is a major issue across the board in the UK. AFCS plays a vital role in addressing mental health issues within the South Asian communities of Britain, many of which are due to cultural issues unique to these communities and which have been highlighted in the Annual Report.

As a charity we can only continue to deliver a service if we continue to exist. This year more than any other year in recent times has seen our funding reduced to a level where our staff has had to take salary cuts. We have had to reduce the number of days per week that we can provide a service in both the London and Birmingham offices, while the number of clients on our waiting list keeps increasing. We are at a crucial crossroads and it is essential that we keep this service going. I commend the tireless efforts of our director in this regard, who has been trying to come up with creative ways to raise additional funds.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the staff, including our volunteers, for their dedication and hard work and wish them all the best for the year ahead.

Fawzia Samad
Chair
# Contents

Chair's Report .......................................................... 2
Who We Are ............................................................ 4
Our Objectives ......................................................... 5
Issues We Deal With ................................................ 6
2017-18 in Review ....................................................... 14
Our Approach .......................................................... 17
Case Studies ............................................................ 18
Client Testimonials .................................................... 21
Financials for 2017-18 .................................................. 22
The Year Ahead .......................................................... 22
Staff Information ........................................................ 24
Who We Are

The Asian Family Counselling Service (AFCS) is a national charity which has been providing low-cost, confidential and culturally sensitive mental health and relationship counselling services in five languages to South Asian communities in Britain since 1983. Our counsellors are BACP-accredited, professionally trained and supervised therapists. They come from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds and speak Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi and English, thus representing the diversity in the South Asian communities they serve.

We face an ever-increasing demand from British Asian individuals, couples and families who come to us seeking help for a wide variety of issues. They are reluctant to access mainstream counselling services either because of language or cultural barriers. Some of our older clients have never received a formal education and cannot read or write. Then there are younger ones who speak very broken English, especially refugees and those coming from rural parts of the subcontinent. Even among those who are conversational in English, we find that many are far more comfortable talking about complex emotional issues and trauma in their native language. Then there are those who might be fluent in English but find it difficult to explain problems, which have a specific cultural context, to Western practitioners. Because our counsellors have lived experience of South Asian cultural norms and customs, there are fewer risks of issues being misunderstood or lost in translation. Thus the counselling sessions are conducted more efficiently and sensitively.
Our Objectives

To advance awareness among people of South Asian origin resident in the UK about the benefits of marriage and relationship counselling, with the aim of developing a sense of personal responsibility and enriching family life;

To safeguard and protect the good health, both mental and physical, of adults and children of South Asian origin resident in the UK and to ameliorate the hardship and distress caused by the breakdown of marriage;

To educate the public as well as statutory and voluntary organisations about the particular issues faced by the South Asian population.
British Asians, especially those with older parents who arrived in the UK as first generation immigrants, often face pressures to adhere to certain customs brought over from the subcontinent. For instance, it is still common for parents to pressure their children into *arranged marriages* with partners chosen by them from the same caste and community. We have had cases of women and girls being emotionally blackmailed by their families to marry early and start having children. After marriage they are expected to move in with their in-laws and take on responsibilities for housework and caring for the elderly even though they are well-educated and employed full-time. If they happen to be earning more than their husbands, that is often a source of tension in the household. There is still a widely held preference for sons amongst South Asian families and women can be made to feel guilty and inadequate if they are unable to produce male children. In recent years, there has been an increasing trend of families looking for potential suitors online as they lack the extended social network they once enjoyed back in the subcontinent to help them with the search. This also increases the risk of marriages breaking down as there is no longer a vetting process wherein trusted family and friends can do due diligence and vouch for the suitability of the match, and there are also greater opportunities for misrepresentation and fraud.

The **generation and culture gap** between conservative values of older generations of Asian immigrant families and the more modern outlooks of second
and third generations can fray relations and we have had cases of parents coming to us because they were worried about children losing touch with their roots. Teenagers often rebel against parental pressure to adhere to religious customs and rituals. We have also seen young British Asians experiencing identity crises because they have faced racism or discrimination in the UK but at the same time they have never spent an extended period of time in the subcontinent to feel at home there. Some families have come to us because familial relations have deteriorated to such an extent as to cause estrangement, elderly abandonment, or fractious disputes over property and inheritance. Professional help is then needed to mediate between the warring factions of the family, re-establish channels of communication, resolve misunderstandings and heal wounds. Frictions are also common in case of inter-racial and inter-faith marriages and we have had cases where children have been disowned by their parents for marrying outside their faith or community. Even after achieving reconciliation in such cases, families often need on-going counselling and support to work through cultural misunderstandings and latent prejudices.

When domestic violence or abuse (whether physical or emotional) rears its ugly head, it is still generally considered taboo amongst South Asian families to approach outsiders for help for fear of besmirching the family’s honour or izzat. In fact an academic study publicised by the Guardian in 2015 highlighted the
problem of sexual and domestic violence being vastly under-reported in South Asian communities due to this “pervasive culture of shame” (https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/sep/19/abuse-going-unreported-in-britains-south-asian-communities-study). The study also found a widespread lack of awareness that rape within a marriage constituted a criminal offence. Asian women and girls find it especially difficult to talk about sexual abuse when it has been perpetrated by close family relatives such as fathers, brothers, uncles or cousins who they may be financially dependent on. Young brides brought over from the subcontinent, who are socially isolated and may not speak English, are especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation by their in-laws. We have had cases where they were treated no better than forced domestic labour, were monitored at all hours of the day and had little or no freedom to even make a telephone call or leave the house unsupervised.

In general there is still considerable stigma amongst Asian communities around separation and divorce which can lead to people staying in unhappy marriages for long periods of time with children often bearing the brunt of the dysfunctional family dynamic. Recently however, community relations workers in areas with a large Asian population have raised alarm about the increasing number of deserted wives and divorced women seeking shelter and help from local councils and self-help groups. Community relations offices in many Asian areas in Britain have on an average day at least half-a-dozen women seeking financial help.
or asking to be re-housed because they have been thrown out of the marital home ([https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/international/story/19810615-asian-immigrants-in-britain-face-marital-problems-805963-2014-02-24](https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/international/story/19810615-asian-immigrants-in-britain-face-marital-problems-805963-2014-02-24)). There is an urgent need for more refuges and shelters for such women as well as victims of domestic violence. On our part, we strive to accommodate as many of them as we can who come to us for counselling. In recent years, we have also seen a number of cases where the primary breadwinner of the family has faced increasing precariousness of job security which has in some cases led to crippling debt, gambling addictions, or alcohol and drug dependencies. Such cases are more prone to deteriorate into physical abuse as people cope with pressures by venting their frustrations on weaker and dependent family members. In such cases, along with providing counselling to the individuals and their families, AFCS often directs them to other agencies which specialise in debt management, financial advice, and treatment for alcohol and drug addictions. Then there are more complex problems which require ongoing and extensive support. Over the past year we have encountered four cases of slavery where people were trapped in conditions of forced labour for long periods of time, usually because they had fallen prey to unscrupulous moneylenders.

We continue to see cases of forced marriage, a problem we have long sought to raise awareness about among the public and the authorities in the UK. It was gratifying to see an investigation by the Times this year focus on the problem of forced marriages among South Asian communities.
An excerpt from their report is below:

“The Home Office’s role in facilitating forced marriages in Britain was exposed this year by a Times investigation. Women and girls told of being taken abroad by their families and forced to get married, before being raped, impregnated and sent back to Britain to sponsor visas for their husbands. Many contacted officials for help but were told that they could only block their spouses from the country by signing a public objection to the visa, which could be seen by their families. After refusing to waive their anonymity, officials allowed their abusers into the country....Under-reporting is a huge issue and experts believe there are thousands of forced marriage cases every year in the UK, with the vast majority of victims too scared to come forward. Court records seen by this newspaper revealed that women known to have learning disabilities were among those being raped and beaten in Britain after the Home Office issued visas to their husbands...”

The government has announced measures to allow victims of forced marriage to testify anonymously against their spouses during immigration hearings, which we welcome whole-heartedly, because fear of reprisals from their families very often keeps women from doing so. We hope that this belated awareness on the part of the government will soon
extend to the plight of **stranded spouses** - South Asian individuals (mostly young women and girls) who are married off to British nationals, often in order to extract dowry from their parents, only to be taken back to the subcontinent subsequently and abandoned there and in some cases, forcibly separated from their children. Such individuals have no legal status or rights in the UK at the moment which makes it exceedingly difficult for them to seek justice or child custody. AFCS has often gone above and beyond the call of duty in such cases, by finding host families in the UK to sponsor their visas so they may come here and fight legal battles. We have long appealed for these abandoned spouses to be accorded the status of asylum-seekers as at the moment they have no recourse to public funds and find it exceedingly difficult to successfully apply for child custody due to lack of funds, secure housing and uncertain immigration status. We also frequently deal with **refugees and asylum-seekers**. The latter are especially vulnerable because they often face prolonged periods of uncertainty during which their applications are under consideration. Unable to seek employment and often experiencing extreme social isolation as well as the trauma of being separated from loved ones left behind in their countries of origin, these are some of our most at-risk cases who need counselling over long periods of time.
About a third of our clients last year presented with mental health problems such as *depression* and anxiety. The 2014 Health survey for England found that 26 per cent of adults reported having ever been diagnosed with at least one mental health problem. Mental health problems take a toll on self-esteem and on relationships. They can affect a person’s ability to hold down a job thus leading to a vicious circle wherein emotional and financial problems exacerbate anxiety and depression. Meanwhile the stigma related to seeking professional help and counselling persists. If anything, there is a risk of it being reinforced by the increasing use of social media which exerts peer pressure to present an idealised version of oneself to the world. At AFCS our counsellors are accredited by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and are trained to help cope with mental health issues. They also recognise that sometimes the partner or care-giver of the affected person may require counselling as well to understand and cope with the condition.
To Summarise: Some of the Issues We Deal With

- Bullying, harassment and racial attacks
- Pre-Marital Pressures
- Arranged Marriage
- Forced Marriage
- Interracial & Interfaith Relationship
- Intergenerational Conflict & "Culture Gap"
- Elderly Abandonment
- Financial Problems & Unemployment
- Adultery
- Bereavement
- Property & Inheritance Disputes
- Domestic Violence
- Rape & Sexual Abuse
- Human Trafficking & Slavery
- Stranded Spouses
- Refugees & Asylum-seekers
- Gambling, Drug and Alcohol Addictions
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Suicidal Thoughts
- Self-Harm
2017-18 in Review

Due to sharp reductions in government funding we have had to reduce staff working hours. This has had an impact on the number of clients that we were able to see and resulted in long waiting lists. AFCS has had to dip into its reserves and unless more funding is found, next year the situation will be dire. In the past year we held 3020 counselling sessions with 351 clients. Of these, 168 sessions were conducted on the telephone for those unable to come to our offices in London and Birmingham because of distance, transport issues, disability, work or family commitments. The majority of our clients continued to be women.

Breakdown by Gender

- Male: 34%
- Female: 66%

Breakdown by Nationality

- Indian: 53%
- Pakistani: 38%
- Sri Lankan: 2%
- Bengali: 4%
- Other: 3%

Breakdown by Age

- 36-45: 31%
- 26-35: 25%
- 46-55: 24%
- 56-65: 13%
- >76: 1%
- 16-25: 4%
- 66-75: 2%
Below is a breakdown of the kinds of cases and conditions clients presented with.

• Some clients presented with multiple conditions, the above chart treats them separately to give an indication of the frequency with which we encountered a particular case/condition.

• Some cases were not frequent enough to be meaningfully represented in the above chart but nevertheless stood out in our minds for their complexity. For example we encountered 4 cases of slavery, 3 cases of PTSD, 3 cases of bipolar disorder, 3 cases of eating disorder, 2 cases of homelessness and 2 cases of incest.
Demand for our service has come through self-referrals, mental health resource centres, the IAPT services, counselling psychologists, psychiatrists, word-of-mouth, media such as radio, TV and newspapers, online search engines, along with signposting from General Practitioners, Health Visitors, Social Services and other agencies.

AFCS uses CORE 10, PHQ 9, GAD 7 and ENRICH outcome measures to evaluate its service. In Ealing, all clients are required to fill in forms similar to those administered by the IAPT service so that our results may be compared with that of the IAPT service. This has produced a few challenges for AFCS as not all our clients are able to fill in the forms as they are unable to read or write in English.

64% of our clients were unemployed and thus in many cases we had to charge reduced fees or waive them altogether. The average number of sessions per client

95% of clients felt their state of mind or their relationships had seen a significant improvement as a result of counselling. 100% said they would recommend our services to friends and family.
was nine. In the past year we have also continued to engage with local and national media who approach us for insight on social issues which affect or involve British Asian communities ranging from rising divorce rates to forced marriage, inter-racial relationships to grooming practices.

**Our Approach**

At AFCS, we continue to put emphasis on *listening with empathy and without judgement* and providing a safe space for clients so they are able to take a step back from their situation and understand what their issues are and how those issues are affecting them as individuals, couples and (when relevant) as parents. In cases where communication has broken down amongst family members or the stress of daily life has led to issues being ignored, we provide a *therapeutic environment* where a degree of structure is established so that each individual gets the chance to speak and be heard by his/her partner, sibling, parent or relative. We do not prescribe a particular course of action but rather support our clients in whatever choices they make. We are *flexible* in our approach, for example transitioning from individual to couple or group family counselling if required.
When clients first come to us, we conduct an initial assessment of their needs and determine whether our service is the most appropriate for them. If not, they are signposted to other organisations that can better meet their needs. We take a **holistic approach** towards our clients by providing counselling and support, as well as information in matters which may not be directly related to mental health but certainly impact the client’s overall well-being and peace of mind. For e.g. we provide information about the NHS, support groups for drug and alcohol addiction, organisations which deal with financial advice, legal aid and immigration advice, agencies which can help improve English language skills and provide coaching for the process of searching, applying and interviewing for jobs to name a few.

**Case Studies**

A couple had been married for 10 years and had three children. They lived with the husband’s mother in the same house. They had a volatile relationship and the wife had accused her husband and mother-in-law of being physically and emotionally abusive towards her. The local police and social services had been involved and filed reports of domestic violence, expressing concern that the children were at risk of emotional harm, and referred the wife to IAPT counselling to explore possible mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Though the wife frequently tried to leave and move back with her parents, invariable she returned to her husband (possibly due to coercion on the part of her in-laws and/or parents). The couple also faced financial problems and were at risk of having their home repossessed. They finally agreed to come to AFCS for counselling. After a few sessions, they mutually agreed that the mother-in-law was partly responsible for the tensions and should move out. They also resolved to continue working on their relationship for the sake of their children.
A middle-aged woman presented with childhood trauma due to the constant physical abuse she had suffered at the hands of her parents. Despite their constant rejection of her, she yearned for a better relationship with them. Our counsellor used Trauma focussed Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which is the therapy recommended specifically for victims of PTSD and trauma by NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence). The therapy helped her consolidate her painful childhood memories and put them behind her instead of reliving them over and over again. Her self-esteem improved and she eventually found the strength to stand up to her parents and the acceptance to move on with her life.

A middle-aged man living alone had been deemed a risk to himself and sectioned off for a while in a secure mental health facility. Upon being discharged he came to us looking for an Asian counsellor as he felt misunderstood by his neighbours and the authorities. He was highly anxious and hyper vigilant and suffered from severe depression. The counsellor used Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) to address his hyper vigilance and negative thoughts. After just a few sessions, there was a noticeable improvement in his state of mind. His levels of anxiety were considerably reduced and he found the confidence to start going for job interviews again.
A man in his mid-60s married very late in life to a Pakistani woman. The match had been found by his brother in Pakistan. She came from a poor family and when there were delays in her UK visa application, his brother asked him to send funds to provide for her and her family in the meantime. After a while, the man discovered the brother was having an affair with his wife and was keeping the funds he was sending for himself. He was devastated at his brother’s betrayal, fell into depression and became increasingly socially isolated. The AFCS counsellor used Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) which helped him accept the fact his marriage was over. He overcame feelings of shame, guilt and anger and eventually stopped sending money to his brother and filed for divorce.

An asylum-seeker whose case has been pending for 18 years suffers from depression and anxiety. Every month he has to report to a local authority to prove he is still in the country. Ahead of this appointment he experiences debilitating panic attacks which include hyperventilating and insomnia as he worries about being deported. He is socially isolated and has never married; his life in many ways is stuck in limbo. He suffers from feelings of guilt and shame as he had to leave his family behind and he cannot help them financially because he cannot seek full-time employment in the UK while his case is still pending. At AFCS he finally has a safe space to talk about what he has gone through, and his counsellor has incorporated mindfulness techniques and breathing exercises into the sessions to help him cope with anxiety.
Client Testimonials

“I found my counsellor understood my issues & could relate to me and what was going on in my life with my relationships.”

“AFCS has helped me at a time when I was at an all time low and they have shown empathy and also given invaluable advice which has made me understand my situation better and helped me cope.”

“Very good, useful positive service, definitely gave my confidence back, and helped me and guided me through a difficult time in my life. My wife has learnt a lot and gained confidence, and the willingness to live her life in a quality way.”

“Very helpful, supportive and co-operative. My counsellor provided me with personalised support throughout and understood my needs well.”

“This is a great service which supports people to overcome their issues by listening to them with understanding.”

“Excellent service for people of Asian origin as you feel the person you are talking to understands the context in which you have grown up etc…”
Financials for 2017-18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Expenditure = £148,816</th>
<th>Total Income = £119,277</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>£10,764</td>
<td>£112,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£32,459</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>£105,593</td>
<td>£7,042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Year Ahead

Our number one priority next year will be to work on securing alternative and more stable sources of funding from the private sector, as we expect government funding to tighten further as we go through with Brexit. Towards this end we have already revamped our website (www.asianfamilycounselling.org). We are currently developing innovative and engaging fundraising literature and have advertised voluntary positions for professionals with experience in securing donations from businesses, grant-making foundations, trusts and high net worth individuals. We plan to undertake exhaustive prospect research to identify potential donors for e.g. businesses with ties to British Asian communities and foundations which have a history and stated mission of supporting mental health related causes.

In the coming year we will also seek to implement PQASSO, the most commonly used quality assurance system in the UK voluntary and community sector, so that we can assure potential donors of effective governance and put in place monitoring and evaluation processes to quantify the impact our services have on clients.
AFCS was the first organisation in the UK to recognise a critical gap in mental health services and fill it by providing multilingual and culturally sensitive counselling services tailored for South Asian communities. We firmly believe that no one should have to suffer depression, mental trauma or the breakdown of marriage and family relationships alone, and language or cultural barriers should not dissuade people from reaching out and seeking professional help. Neither should the lack of affordability for such services which is why we will continue to provide them at lowered cost or free of charge if the client is unable to pay fees. But in times of decreasing support from the government it is increasingly difficult for the organisation to provide the level of support required by our clients. We would like to thank our staff and volunteers for their hard work and dedication over the past year and without whom we would not be able to provide this service.

Kulbir Randhawa
Director
Staff Information

London

• Kulbir Randhawa  
  (Director): krandhawa@btconnect.com
• Rita Mangat  
  (Administrator): ritamangat@hotmail.com
• Jayashree Shahani  
  (Data): jay.afcs@btconnect.com
• Balbir Bansi (Counsellor)
• Baksho Johal (Counsellor)
• Chhaya Shah (Counsellor)
• Farhana Moussa (Counsellor)
• Surabhi Narendranath (Volunteer)

Birmingham

• Gurbaksh Johal  
  (Administrator): bham.afcs@btconnect.com
• Supriya Dharmadhikari (Counsellor)
• Naureen Yawar (Counsellor)
• Dipika Mistry (Counsellor)
• Paramjit Sall (Counsellor)
• Daljinder Legah (Volunteer Counsellor)
• Jasvinder Singh (Supervisor)
• Kulwinder Panesar (Volunteer)
• Romy Aluwalia (Volunteer)