

Cross-Party Group on India

Friday 16 August 2024, 09:30 – 10:30am

Minutes

Present

Group members

Pam Gosal MSP
Michelle Thomson MSP
Paul O’Kane MSP
Sharon Dowey MSP
Alexander Stewart MSP
Douglas Lumsden MSP
Jackson Carlaw MSP

Invited guests

Amit Chaudhary, Indian Consulate, Edinburgh
Professor Pankaj Pankaj, University of Edinburgh
Francesca Casci, Director of External Relations, University of Aberdeen

Secretariat services provided by Daria Spence, MSP Staff

Apologies

Kenneth Gibson MSP
Dr Sandesh Gulhane MSP
Miles Briggs MSP
Foysoil Choudhury MSP
Murdo Fraser MSP
Dr Poonam Gupta OBE, Vice President – Scottish Chambers of Commerce

1. Welcome and Apologies

The Convenor, Pam Gosal MSP, welcomed the group to the meeting and thanked everyone for their attendance.

Apologies were noted.

The Convenor welcomed Michelle Thomson MSP to her role as Deputy Convenor and put on record her thanks to Ivan McKee MSP for his contributions to the CPG in his former role as Deputy Convenor.

The Convenor noted that today's meeting would focus on the topic of culture with presentations from India cultural organisations in Scotland.

The minutes from the last meeting of the Group held on 26 June 2023 were approved by Alexander Stewart MSP, seconded by Dr Poonam Gupta OBE in writing.

2. Briefing on MSP delegation to India

The Convenor introduced a discussion on the recent CPG delegation to India. PG thanked Dr Gupta for her help and support.

The Convenor reminded the CPG of the objectives of the trade mission:

1. Connect with FinTech organisations in India and highlight the possibilities for collaboration between the rapidly expanding FinTech industries of Scotland and India.
2. Develop a strategy for how the Scottish and Indian FinTech industries can work together more effectively in the future.
3. Potential Memorandum of Understanding to be signed in the future between FinTech Scotland and FinTech organisations in India, which builds upon the existing UK-India Joint Working Group.

The Convenor noted that at a previous meeting, the group agreed the first objective had been achieved during the delegation, and they should now pursue the next two objectives.

PG highlighted the importance of the group's meeting with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations while in India and how the group can use that to enhance cultural relations between India and Scotland.

3. Presentations

The Convenor introduced the topic of culture by highlighting the important work done by community organisations across Scotland to raise awareness of Indian culture, its values and openness. PG noted that at a time of widespread division, it is important to celebrate our culture differences and learn more about one another.

The Convenor introduced the Nayan Nagar (Glasgow Indians Association) and Rajnish Singh (Edinburgh Diwali) by thanking them for their work in sharing Indian culture through events and initiatives across Scotland.

Mr Nagar spoke briefly about the history of the Glasgow Indians Association, including its formation and foundations.

He explained that the mission began with identifying key festivities in which Indian and Scottish culture could be celebrated side by side and identified.

Mr Nagar then spoke about how the Glasgow Indians Association have supported communities across Scotland and across the globe, including through the Covid-19 emergency, blood donation crisis and the war in Ukraine. Through this, he said, the Glasgow Indians Association has connected communities from students to the elderly, through philanthropy.

The Convenor thanks Mr Nagar for the informative presentation and praised the philanthropic nature of the Glasgow Indians Associations work.

Mr Rajnish Singh talked about the history of Scottish – Indian ties and the important role Indian diaspora have played in Edinburgh and more broadly, Scotland’s cultural tapestry.

Mr Singh noted that Edinburgh Diwali has been a community-led Scottish charity based in Edinburgh since 2015 and its executive committee is made up of volunteers of all key faiths from pan India now resident in Edinburgh.

He told the group that primary schools’ engagement was a key part of the festival pre-Covid, but now is only done on an ad-hoc basis due to funding constraints. Reinstating this remains a key aim for Edinburgh Diwali.

Mr Singh told the group that Edinburgh Diwali, although only once per year, provides a platform for more than 150 amateurs, semi-professional and professional performers to showcase their talent in front of more than 5,000 people. He praised the accessibility of the event for all to attend and the ability of the values of Diwali to transcend cultural barriers.

Mr Singh drew the group’s attention to challenges faced by Edinburgh Diwali, the main one being funding. He noted that City of Edinburgh Council funding only covers around 30 – 40% of the event and so, sustainable funding is a huge challenge. In addition to this, he touched on the need for a dedicated cultural centre for Indian arts and heritage showcasing and the need to reinstate its engagement with schools.

The Convenor thanked Mr Singh for his contribution and the Edinburgh Diwali’s commitment to showcasing Indian culture. The Convenor then concluded the presentations by summing them up and thanking both for their important role in events across Scotland.

4. Questions

The Deputy Convenor, Michelle Thomson MSP, thanked Mr Singh and Mr Nagar for their presentations and conveyed her delight to join her first CPG on India meeting as a Deputy Convenor.

The Deputy Convenor then asked Mr Nagar what direct engagement the Glasgow Indian Association has had with Royal Scottish National Orchestra (RSNO). Mr Nagar stated that they have not had direct contact, however, often signpost the RSNO to parents so that their children may have the opportunity to connect with music.

Professor Pankaj noted that the University of Edinburgh are currently on a shortlist for a fintech collaboration with a university in Gujarat and looks forward to discussing more on that when the CPG visits the topic of education. He also said that while a lot is done to promote Indian culture in Scotland, more could be done to promote Scottish culture in India. He said that pre-pandemic, there used to be Burns Suppers held in India – and that, the CPG should try and improve the awareness of Scottish culture in India.

In response to Professor Pankaj, the Convenor said she would contact him to find out more about the potential fintech collaboration offline.

Alexander Stewart MSP thanked the presenters for their contributions and remarked on how these cultural celebrations create a platform for supporting connection. He asked the group what more politicians could do to enable more cultural awareness events and celebrations. In response, Mr Singh highlighted the work is all done by volunteers and that more could be done to support voluntary organisations in the culture sector. He noted that while there has been some support from Creative Scotland, they sometimes treat it like a commercial organisation which makes it difficult for community organisations.

Deputy Convenor, Paul O’Kane MSP, thanked Mr Singh and Mr Nagar for their contributions and asked about cultural centres, as these were mentioned in his presentation. Mr Singh emphasised that it was difficult to find a centre large enough to host the size of audience that attends Edinburgh Diwali.

Ravi Ladva, who is about to take over the graduate programme at the Scottish Hindi Foundation suggested that the CPG may wish to focus on renewables as a topic in the future, as well as look into employee retention and two-tier visas.

The Convenor agreed that renewables would make an excellent topic for discussion at a future CPG meeting and said that following a discussion on employee retention, the CPG could write to a UK Government minister about visas as this is a reserved matter.

Manjulika Singh OBE talked about the importance of yoga for mental health and the importance of creating a shared space for all communities. The Convenor also recognised the importance of yoga for health.

Rohini Sharma Joshi OBE talked about how older people are still doing so much to promote Indian heritage and felt that it was important to celebrate the heritage of a legacy they left behind. The Convenor, Mr Nagar and Mr Singh all emphasised the importance of acknowledging the role of generations past who paved the way.

Annie Buddle talked about Scottish traditions in India, the led mining museum linking Bengal and Scotland and the importance of preserving heritage. The Convenor thanked her for her insightful comments.

5. Areas of other business

The Convenor thanked everyone for participating in the discussion and opened the discussion for areas of other business by signalling that Harish Lokhun from the British Council wished to speak.

Harish Lokhun talked about the British Council's key projects on culture, including the Calcutta book festival. He also told the group that they are looking into employability and employee retention, as well as alongside Edinburgh Chambers of Commerce. He also stated that climate was another area of interest for the British Council.

The Convenor thanked him for his contribution and encouraged all participants to get in touch with her if they had ideas for future meeting topics and areas to explore.

The Convenor assured participants that the group would listen to the challenges faced by community organisations and write to the Scottish Government, she also noted that support does not always need to be monetary, it can be support in planning also.

The Convenor thanked everyone for joining and concluded the meeting.