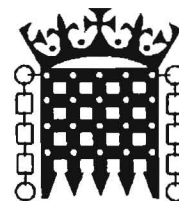


Faith in the Community



Strengthening ties between faith groups and local authorities

Executive Summary

In February 2012 Christians in Parliament produced the *Clearing the Ground* report about the freedom of Christians in the UK. One of the findings of the report was that there is widespread religious illiteracy in many public institutions.

For UK faith groups the closest interaction that they have with government processes and institutions is at a local level. It is therefore important to understand how local authorities and faith groups work together, what they do and what barriers and benefits exist. This report seeks to explore these dynamics in order to promote closer and more fruitful relationships in the future.

In summer 2012 a survey was sent to all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales. Drawing on the structure of a survey done in 2008 by the Interfaith Network that considered similar issues, the perspectives of local authorities were sought on their knowledge of and interaction with faith groups.

From the 155 responses it was clear that the engagement between churches and local authorities is often strong, fruitful and delivering much-needed support for our communities.

Although the report considers what faith groups do and their relationship with local authorities generally, it also considers what churches do specifically. This is because, while the broader picture of faith engagement is of great value and interest, Christians in Parliament have a direct interest in how churches and Christian charities engage with local government.

**155 local
authorities
responded**

What do faith groups do? One per cent or 70 per cent?

LOTS

Faith groups make a vast contribution to their local communities across a range of predictable and surprising activities. Repeatedly local authorities cited the role of food banks, Street Pastors and debt advice centres. Other activities were identified which demonstrate the 'cradle to grave' support that faith communities provide, from caring for the young and the elderly to helping with dog training and anger management.

UNKNOWN

Some local authorities responded with uncertainty, and some were even unaware of any work being done locally by faith groups. Indeed, when asked to estimate the percentage of the voluntary and community sector work that was faith-based, the estimates varied from one per cent to 70 per cent.

MERCY

The nature of the activities provided by faith groups varied considerably from area to area. In many places the activities are principally church-based programmes which may directly or indirectly interact with the council, for example foodbanks and debt advice centres. In other areas there are more formal links with the authority and other public sector bodies. Initiatives such as Street Pastors might come into this category.

SERVICES

A small, but significant category of respondents were local authorities with experience of formal contracting of services to faith groups. For example, through the provision of elderly care services in Poole, or the delivery of a troubled families' strategy in south Somerset, or in Warrington where local churches have taken over the library and are using it to provide community services.

How do local authorities relate to faith groups?

FORMAL

Most local authorities have formal bodies that are either a part of the council apparatus, or are clearly linked. These may be an equality and diversity forum, or a faith leaders' reference group. In other cases networks such as Churches Together or other area specific forums that existed independent of the local authority were mentioned.

CUTBACKS

Many authorities mentioned that in recent years budget cuts have had an impact on faith group engagement. In some cases cuts meant the loss of an officer post which had been dedicated to faith groups, or the rolling of the portfolio into a wider equality and diversity post. The responses to the survey mostly came from either the equality and diversity teams or community partnership teams – teams that have often been significantly affected by budget cuts.

41% of local authorities had a dedicated faith officer post

RELATIONSHIPS

The formal structures put in place by local authorities were often not particularly effective at delivering strong partnerships between the authorities and faith groups. However, they were frequently cited as being important as places where relationships could be built and trust developed. Time and time again the areas of the UK with the strongest levels of interaction were the ones that had developed the strongest informal relationships between senior figures in the local authority and local church leaders.

Religious literacy

The survey showed that local authorities often have a poor understanding of faith groups, their beliefs and how those beliefs work themselves out in the lives of the faithful. It also found that faith groups often have an equally poor understanding

of how local government works and the language that is required to engage with it.

Central government are abdicating their responsibility in not providing guidance to local authorities on how to develop religious literacy. If they are serious about renewing civil society they need to do more to understand those who are most active at the heart of it.

Many of the local authorities surveyed recognised a gap in their understanding of faith communities, and more must be done to address this. A clear need was demonstrated for improved training on faith issues. Where training was provided it was usually through wider equality and diversity frameworks, which many respondents acknowledged did not improve religious literacy. Occasional examples were uncovered of innovative practice including Faith Trails where different faiths are explained through a tour of religious premises.

There is a significant opportunity for churches to play a role in helping local authorities become more faith-literate.

Greater religious literacy is not achieved by local authorities agreeing with faith groups. It is done when time and attention is given to understanding why faith groups do what they do and addressing presumptions and prejudices that can restrict effective partnerships.

Barriers to engagement between local authorities and faith groups

Many local authorities and faith groups enjoy great relationships through a mutual enthusiasm to work together. However, the research showed there are a number of barriers that restrict engagement, or have been encountered in the process of working with faith groups.

1. When there are capacity problems on both sides. Budget cuts have reduced the staff of local authorities, which has lessened their ability to initiate engagement. The facilities and staff time which sometimes ensured it happened are no longer there.

Another capacity problem rests with the faith groups. A number of local authorities had carried out audits of the contribution of churches and Christian charities, identifying the strength of voluntary capacity that exists within the Church.

However, it is clear that this capacity is not limitless, and neither is it always best directed. One of the starkest comments came from South Norfolk Council who said: *"A recent issue has arisen that Night-stop [a project providing emergency accommodation for young adults] hosts have been unavailable to provide the service that they are volunteering for because they are too busy at church-related meetings, meaning that the money being spent on recruiting and training hosts has been wasted."*

2. When organisational cultures clash. Sometimes this was as specific as the need for churches to have sufficient financial and governance structures in place to show that they could be trusted to carry out the functions the council might be passing onto them. The research showed that there is work to be done in this area, and sometimes the requirements are quite onerous.

This is also reflected in the language and culture of local authorities which can at times be very different to that of the Church. Faith groups sometimes have to wade through labyrinthine

processes with swathes of acronyms to decode when engaging with their local authority.

3. When there are mutual concerns about what each partner might require the other to do. Overwhelmingly, these concerns were more about perceptions than reality.

Perceptions generally related to three areas: exclusivity, equality and evangelism.

EXCLUSIVITY

There was a repeated concern that faith groups only wanted to provide services or activities for their own faith community. Tamworth Borough Council said: *"The mere fact that activities take place within a faith setting will mean that many members of the community will not attend due to a misconception that the event is an attempt to draw them into the faith group."*

The survey showed that this perception was not matched by the broad access that was in evidence across the vast range of services provided by faith groups.

EQUALITY

Local authorities were often concerned about whether people from other faiths, or from the LGBT community, would receive equal access to services, and if they did whether they would be able to receive it without restriction.

The London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea commented: *"Local authorities may also need to be mindful of any religious views that could cause discrimination of service users, for example faith groups that are opposed to homosexuality."*

There is a perceived fear (within parts of the public sector, public and media) that faith groups will seek to use public sector-funded service delivery as a means of increasing the number of followers of that faith group; and/or seek to discriminate between users of public sector-funded service delivery on the basis of the users' faith or adherence to the beliefs or practices of the faith group, in particular beliefs that are or might appear to be contrary to equality legislation. There is a perceived fear (within faith groups) that local authorities won't work with and/or don't value faith groups. Generally, all of these perceptions are false or can be overcome through discussion and better understanding of each other – but they do create barriers.

North Yorkshire County Council

"One of the aims of most faith groups is to provide support to champion and meet the needs of vulnerable people in the local community. We are all called to serve the people. The fact is that by working together with faith groups we can do and achieve more. Faith groups often stand on the side of the hungry and poor and provide support for those who are grieving."

Doncaster Council

The levels of fear raised around discrimination was not matched by accounts of such discrimination taking place. Often those authorities with the best relationships had overcome barriers and concerns by getting to know people within the faith communities rather than making assumptions about beliefs and actions.

EVANGELISM

Many local authorities raised concerns that faith communities would do what they considered them to be primarily committed to, ie promoting their faith, rather than the service they are commissioned to provide. Rochford District Council said: *"A key challenge would be the potential for faith-based groups to use funding for the delivery of services for promoting their faith."*

No churches expect local authorities to fund their evangelism, and faith groups generally understand that when in formal partnership their commitment is to provide the service commissioned. This doesn't mean being silent about faith and beliefs, but it does mean clients and other staff are treated in the same way they would be in any other work context.

What are the benefits for local authorities of working with faith groups?

The research showed that the barriers to better engagement are often overcome. Despite challenges in the capacity of both faith groups and local authorities, churches have a well of resources that are vitally needed by our communities at this time. They also demonstrate an unparalleled depth of commitment to their communities, and especially those in poverty.

Churches reach the parts that local authorities cannot. This is because they are located within the communities that they serve. Churches are not only physically there in the fabric of buildings that bring people together, they are made up of people from the rich and the poor, from the young and the old – and compelled by compassion, they are also on the streets and estates of the UK every day. It is encouraging that many of the local authorities surveyed acknowledged this unique social good, realising that faith groups are intimately connected into communities in ways that they will never be able to, and that they are committed to working with the most vulnerable and hardest to reach.

In light of these findings the report recommends that local authorities...

1. Commit to working more closely with faith groups to support and sustain local community life
2. Work with leaders of faith communities to develop informal relationships
3. Look for ways to enhance the capacity of faith groups to engage in local authority structures
4. Simplify and improve language and processes
5. Use local faith groups to contribute to training and development for staff
6. Provide clear guidance to staff on provision for religion and belief
7. Clarify the role and position of beliefs in the delivery and operation of activities and services
8. Promote the reasonable accommodation of beliefs and faith-motivated practices as a goal
9. Develop plural rather than secular modes of operation
10. Share best practice between local authorities
11. Develop research and measurement into the local impact of spiritual capital
12. Audit faith-based activity in a standard and comparable form.

The Faith in the Community report was administered and produced by the Evangelical Alliance for Christians in Parliament