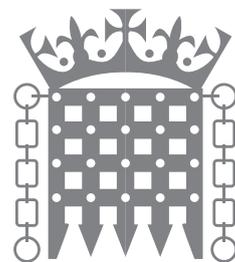




# Faith in the Community

Strengthening ties between faith groups and local authorities





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## **Christians in Parliament**

Christians in Parliament is an official All-Party Parliamentary Group. It is comprised of MPs and Peers from across the political spectrum.

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# Foreword

I welcome this report by Christians in Parliament and the Evangelical Alliance looking at strengthening the relationship that our local authorities have with religious communities.

Churches and other religious institutions have a unique role to play in building and developing stronger communities. The Church of England, for example, has a grassroots connection in every community in our country, serving all but especially those in need.

You can tell how healthy a society is by how it treats the most vulnerable. We all have an interest in maintaining and promoting the common good. That attitude should flow out in every area of society, including in our engagement and interaction with the political process.

Too often we forget that those who stand for public office are human just like us. They are members of our community, with an intention to do their best to help our society develop – regardless of which political party they belong to. This is not a ‘Them and Us’ concept, but a process where we should all work together to help our local area flourish.

Building strong working relationships between local authorities and religious communities should not be based on mere ‘tolerance’. It should be about talking, listening, and growing together. Together, working in unity of spirit, we are stronger than when we try to do things in isolation.

I recently had the privilege of being Sponsor of a Fairness Commission in York, during their budget setting considerations, giving independent and informed advice to our local council on how to protect services for those most in need. This was a good example of how those who are motivated by a spiritual care for their neighbour can engage with the political process and work with those democratically elected to give leadership across a city.

I hope that this report that you will renew your own personal commitment to encourage and pray for your local authorities, and support the work that is being undertaken to make our country a better, more hopeful, place to live.

**Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York**



# 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.

“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.

# Introduction

Faith is a force for good in Britain. In every community across the country faith groups are at the heart of neighbourhoods making a difference and transforming lives. They are responding to poverty, galvanising communities and breathing life and hope into society.

In communities often isolated and disconnected from local government and public services, faith groups perform a vital role in reaching people who otherwise might not be reached. Faith groups are an invaluable and vibrant part of community life and it is essential that local authorities are able to effectively engage with them. A strong relationship between local authorities and faith groups will lead to stronger links with their community, better understanding and more effective delivery of services.

## What have we done?

*Clearing the Ground*<sup>1</sup> – the preliminary report into the freedom of Christians in the UK was published in early 2012. Produced by an All-Party Committee of Inquiry established by Christians in Parliament, it aimed to clarify the situation that Christians face in their everyday lives. The report outlined a number of findings relating to freedom of religion in the UK and listed a set of recommendations. This report is primarily a response to the second recommendation:

- Guidance for local authorities on how to deal with faith groups needs to be strengthened<sup>2</sup>.

In exploring the varied relationship between faith groups and local authorities across the country, we heard anecdotal evidence of good practice, misunderstanding, and wilful ignorance. As a

response to these findings this report seeks to uncover a comprehensive picture of what this relationship looks like across the UK. The objective is to identify challenges and how things can be improved, and provide a resource for developing better guidance.

What is clear is that in communities across Great Britain churches and other faith groups are at the heart of local life. It is our hope that by reviewing the considerable contribution faith groups are making and gaining a better understanding of the benefits and challenges they bring, this report can help strengthen their relationships with local authorities. We also hope local authorities will be better-informed and equipped to develop their relationships with faith groups in the future.

This report looks at the local activities of faith groups, ranging from those that are commissioned by the local authorities to deliver services, to those where the relationship may not extend beyond a knowledge that they exist. While our interest is focused on the relationship between local authorities and Christian groups we have sought to identify and analyse how a wide variety of faith groups relate to local government. We have taken this approach to provide some comparison with the 2008 Inter Faith Forum survey<sup>3</sup>, which looked at similar issues. Likewise, it is important to assess how local authorities relate to different faith groups, and although Christianity is by far the largest religious grouping that local authorities deal with, the terms (and language) of engagement are often generic rather than focused on a specific faith group.

The first chapter seeks to map the activities we uncovered, and to demonstrate the immense contribution faith groups make to civil society.

<sup>1</sup> Christians in Parliament (2012) *Clearing the Ground*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Inter Faith Network (2008) *Local authority engagement with faith groups and inter faith organisations* (Local Government Association: London)

This is followed by an analysis of the relationship between faith groups and local authorities, through an assessment of the structures for cooperation, and through consideration of the benefits and challenges of working together.

A key finding of the *Clearing the Ground* report was that in both local and national government, religious illiteracy was problematic and endemic. Consequently in Chapter Three we assess the measures local authorities take to understand religion and the activities it inspires.

In Chapter Four we consider in detail the obstacles local authorities encounter when engaging with faith groups – in particular issues of organisation, capacity and perception. This latter category includes concerns about equality and diversity, inclusivity and proselytisation.

In the final chapter we suggest that a more focused approach to engaging with faith groups is necessary and the current categories for engagement miss something of what makes faith groups such a powerful force for transforming their local communities.

Three times a year the Croydon Churches Forum asks the leader and chief executive of Croydon Council: “What’s the biggest need in our town?” As a result of these meetings the churches have been able to work alongside the council to make a real difference to the lives of local people – from organising a cross-community foodbank to helping house homeless residents to other parts of the country.

The relationship has developed trust between the local authority and the churches to the extent that in the wake of the London riots in 2011 the Forum was asked to chair reconciliation meetings between the looters and the authorities.

Throughout the report we seek to supplement the evidence gathered from local authorities with case studies from local churches and Christian

organisations of their experience of working collaboratively.

The report concludes with recommendations for how relationships between local authorities and faith groups can further improve and contribute towards vital partnership for the wellbeing of their community.

### Why have we done it?

Two competing trends support the value and necessity for this research:

- First, it is widely acknowledged that a vast amount of voluntary activity in the UK takes place in and through faith groups. Local audits of faith activity show a widespread and deep contribution to the life of local communities. However, this evidence is not aggregated across the whole country and is only indicative of the role that faith groups play.
- Second, in recent years there has been an increase in the secularist temperament of formal institutions. This is discernible at national and local government levels and in public bodies and the private sector. The result is that, while faith groups may be publicly welcomed for what they contribute to local communities, there is often official suspicion as to why and how they do it. Unchecked, this can develop into a fear that their beliefs may be problematic, rather than integral to who they are and what they do.

Our view is that any attempt to create or maintain a secularist institution (without religious influence) is simply privileging non-religious worldviews as identified in the initial *Clearing the Ground* report. This report seeks to identify whether – and if so, how – the myth of secular neutrality has permeated public life in recent years<sup>4</sup>. The aim of this critique is not to gain a privileged position for people of religion, but to clear the ground at a local level for faith to play its part in the renewal of civil society and the regeneration of our

<sup>4</sup> cf Spencer, Nick (2007) *Neither private nor privileged* (Theos: London); Chaplin, Jonathan (2008) *Talking God: The legitimacy of religious public reasoning* (Theos: London)

communities. Throughout, we affirm that it is vital for local authorities to engage with faith groups as an issue of fairness, and that the activities of faith groups bring an added value to the life of our communities in a way that non-religious groups often do not – indeed might not be able to – supply.

It is our hope that this report helps to demonstrate the vast contribution faith groups already make, and help local authorities make the most of this. We hope that it will help build stronger and more positive working relationships in the future – for the benefit of all.

## Methodology

In some areas faith audits have been conducted to show the contribution of faith groups, particularly in regards to voluntary activity and the delivery of community services. This evidence is gathered and presented in different ways in different authorities. Indeed, sometimes the audits do not relate to local government areas, and are missing from most of the country.

Although it is beyond the scope of this report to replicate these studies nationwide, our findings do suggest that such a project would certainly be worth pursuing. In a more limited way, this report principally seeks to investigate the activity of faith groups, and their engagement with local authorities from the local authority perspective. We have augmented this approach with some case studies and interviews with local faith leaders.

In June 2012 a survey was sent to all local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland. In this communication the chair of the Committee of Inquiry, Gary Streeter MP, asked each authority to complete the survey in order to explore their interaction with faith groups. Responses were in electronic and printed form. In total 155 responses were received, representing a response rate of 37 per cent.

The survey did not include local authorities in Northern Ireland because the differences in local government powers, national legislation and the make-up of the religious community from the rest of the UK would make comparisons difficult. The survey also accounted for the fact that in some areas legislation relating to engagement with voluntary and faith groups differs between England, Wales and Scotland. Although this does not change the overall environment of engagement with faith groups, we do acknowledge that it does affect some of the specific mechanisms for community involvement. This is mostly applicable in England and Wales following the 2011 Localism Act<sup>5</sup>, which provided new powers for community groups and if requested required local authorities to consider opening up provision of services to outside providers.

The survey consisted of a mixture of short answer questions, a series of yes/no questions, and evaluative metrics providing for a numerical score. The first set of questions sought to establish the ways in which local authorities engage with faith groups. These do not provide the scope for comparison or correlation. Subsequent questions were designed to enable data analysis on the responses and provide a more substantive measure of how local authorities relate to faith groups.

The variable nature of the responses has had to be taken into account in producing this report. Most responses were dealt with in the manner of a freedom of information request, often specifically citing this. The responses also came from different sections of the local authority. The original request was sent to each chief executive but, as was expected, the survey was passed for response to the most appropriate officer. Often the responses came from equality and diversity or community partnership officers. Some local authorities provided a great deal of information, often supplying additional publications or websites detailing their engagement with faith

<sup>5</sup> The Localism Act 2011

groups. Others answered in a very minimalist manner.

We have sought not to treat short minimal answers as evidence in and of themselves of a poor relationship with faith groups and neither view detailed answers as proof of good engagement.

In assessing the responses of each local authority we took into account: the range of activities; depth of relationships; the relational dynamics of the engagement with faith groups; the nature of the interactions between faith groups and local authorities; and the efforts taken by authorities to understand and learn about faith groups. We acknowledge that this does not provide a foolproof perspective of the relationship between local authorities and faith groups, but we are satisfied that it enables a robust analysis of the characteristics of local authorities. We hope that this report will prompt further, ongoing research in this area.

### **Research parameters: Christian groups and other faith groups**

Christians in Parliament (CiP) is an official All-Party Parliamentary Group and consists of MPs and peers from the major parties and from a wide range of Christian traditions<sup>6</sup>. The Committee of Inquiry for this report consists of parliamentarians associated with CiP. They reflect a broad cross-party, and cross-denominational spectrum from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords; and they have overseen the research, development and publication of this report.

The main objective of this report is to better understand how churches and Christian organisations relate to local authorities and

from this understanding recommend how this partnership can be strengthened and utilised. To this end the survey asked questions on how local authorities relate to faith groups generally and to churches (and other Christian groups) specifically. This approach was premised upon the fact that a proportion of the engagement between faith groups and local authorities takes place via interfaith forums and networks. The approach also accounts for the fact that the framework of the 2010 Equality Act places religion and belief as a general protected characteristic<sup>7</sup>.

It is not the intent of this report to compare how local authorities engage with Christian groups to how they engage with other faiths, nor to suggest that the value of faith communities is confined to Christian groups. It is clearly not, and we acknowledge and welcome the contributions that other faiths play in working with local authorities. However, we have a stated interest in supporting the Christian community to engage positively with local and national government, and this is the community we know best. It is also by far the largest, both in terms of general population and the activities cited by local authorities. The terminology associated with 'faith groups' has been our preferred descriptor because it provides some degree of comparability to a study conducted by the Inter Faith Forum in 2008<sup>8</sup>, and this consistency of language will facilitate better long-term analysis.

Most of the findings of this report refer to churches and Christian groups. This should not be read as proof of any lack of activity from other faiths. However, as we hope becomes clear, there is a need for a revitalised understanding and engagement with faith groups by local authorities. In relation to this, developing religious literacy that appreciates the substantive diversity of faith groups should be a key priority for local authorities.

<sup>6</sup> [www.christiansinparliament.org.uk](http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk)

<sup>7</sup> The Equality Act 2010

<sup>8</sup> Inter Faith Network (2008) *Local authority engagement with faith groups and inter faith organisations* (Local Government Association: London)

## Summary

Overall we were presented with a positive picture of local authorities' engagement with faith groups. The report illustrates that engagement varies across the country and it identifies areas where the relationship can be improved. Importantly, we are encouraged that relationships appear to be improving with a wide range of local authorities seeking greater engagement with faith groups. We are also encouraged to find a

growing commitment among faith groups to work collaboratively, both within and aligned to statutory arrangements.

In a de-secularising global context<sup>9</sup>, faith groups will play a key role in affecting the social cohesion necessary to renew civil society. Therefore, it is highly likely that the future will require closer and stronger relationships between government institutions and faith groups. We hope that this engagement can be informed, positive and fruitful.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Berger, Peter (1999) *The desecularization of the world* (William B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids); Davie, Grace (2002) *Europe: the exceptional case* (Darton, Longman & Todd: London)

# 1. What do faith groups do?

## The scale of faith group activities

Islington Borough Council provided a link to a document detailing all the faith group activity they are aware of in their borough. It lists more than 100 different activities and by its very nature is likely to be an incomplete list. Islington is a large urban local authority (LA) and is unlikely to be representative of all the LAs across Great Britain.

Just imagine, however, if it was. That would mean more than 43,000 faith-based activities across the country. In our research, many LAs recognised their incomplete knowledge of what goes on in their area, while others simply said there were too many to list. The discrepancy between information reported by each LA means that it is impossible to assess the overall level of faith activity in the areas surveyed, and still less so the whole country.

Consequently, instead of attempting to provide a comprehensive picture we hope to add detail, colour and texture to the sketch that has already been created through local faith audits. The overall picture is that faith groups are highly active in their communities, and that this activity is overwhelmingly geared to benefit all of their local community and not just their own congregation.

The survey asked councils to estimate what percentage of voluntary and community work was carried out by faith groups. Admittedly this is a somewhat challenging question to answer with any accuracy, but the responses not only help to estimate the level of provision but also – and unintentionally – cast light on the way different local authorities view faith groups. The answers ranged from “minimal, maybe one per cent”; to “a lot, probably 70 per cent”. It is highly unlikely that both these figures are correct, even accounting for local differences.

This shows that some LAs are at best unaware either of the activities that many faith groups provide, or are unaware that it is faith groups providing many of the activities. There is a further challenge in analysing the responses in that the survey asked LAs to provide details of services provided by faith groups. The concept of ‘service’ might infer a particularly contractual connotation, it usually implies funding, whereas a lot of activities provided are not funded or formally connected to the council. Oadby and Wigston Borough Council noted they considered many of the items listed as activities rather than services. This serves to highlight the potential for the differing relationships, language and arrangements between LAs and faith groups across Great Britain to limit the analysis of the results.

A further problem in accounting for the volume of activities provided by faith groups is that many areas of the country have two tiers of local government, and faith groups may relate to both a country and district council, or to whichever has responsibility for the policy area they interact with. Regional diversity is also a factor for consideration in assessing the findings in this report. Across the UK interaction between faith groups and local authorities is very much contingent upon the often stark demographic variations between local authorities with large urban (industrial and/or commercial), suburban, or rural characteristics.

## The range of activities that faith groups do – different types of council engagement

Faith groups provide an incredible range of activities and services for their local community. From dog training to anger management, from sign language classes to marriage courses, these

activities cover a gamut of local needs and interests. The types of activity provided fall into several categories:

- Services that are funded by the LA and contractually provided by the faith group.
- Activities that have a formal link with the council, for example, food banks which receive referrals for their service from the LA and other public sector institutions.
- Projects initiated and operated by the faith groups, but which in the course of their activity have developed links with the LA. The operation of Street Pastors and Street Angels in many parts of the UK fits into this category.
- Activities that the LA is aware of but does not have any specific link with apart from perhaps occasionally profiling in literature to signpost it to potential users. This could take the form of independently-funded and operated youth clubs.
- Activities that the LA would not be aware of if it was not for specific outreach into faith communities to gather information.

This range of activity shows the vitality of faith groups in bringing life to their local communities. In response to the question about what services faith groups provided Thanet District Council said:

*“Welfare and community services from a broad range of partners, including church groups such as Global Generation, the Salvation Army and the various Church of England parish churches. These organisations are particularly busy in our deprived communities.”*

Exeter City Council demonstrated a fairly typical range of activities, observing: “There are a number of activities taking place across the city that are run by faith-based groups, for example, youth clubs, Street Pastors and a food bank. This is valuable work which complements the services run by the city council.”

The London Borough of Islington and Staffordshire County Council provided links to documents giving more details of faith activities. Staffordshire reported that faith communities are involved in

551 projects and initiatives aimed at benefiting local communities.

In Staffordshire a large proportion of the engagement – especially in Stoke-on-Trent – is a product of extensive work by the churches to see what they can do to serve their community. Saltbox is a charity established to develop and co-ordinate Christian activity in the town and across Staffordshire. Lloyd Cooke, who leads the charity, commented: “In 2001, a secular study looking at various socio-economic indicators in 376 towns and cities in England and Wales placed Stoke-on-Trent at the bottom of the list. The unenviable title of ‘the worst place to live in the country’ proved to be a catalyst for Christians to begin to meet together in order to pray for the area.”

He went on to say: “Links with the local authority have been strengthened by the setting up of the Civic Faith Link Forum. These quarterly gatherings bring together various faith leaders with representatives from the local authority to discuss different strategic issues affecting local people. The recent setting up of a bespoke chaplaincy service for the local business community, based in the offices of the Chamber of Commerce, is a further positive example of developing partnership links.

“For many of the leaders in Stoke-on-Trent, whether they be ‘sacred or secular’, there is a growing awareness that if we are to see lasting transformation in our city then it will be because we are working at it together. Ancient wisdom from scripture reminds us of the following promise: ‘Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called repairer of broken walls, restorer of streets with dwellings’ (Isaiah 58:12).”

Cambridge City Council began their response saying: “there are too many to list” and then went on to give an overview of activities serving the young and old of their community. Of the services provided, Chichester District Council commented: “These tend to be engagement and peer-to-peer services rather than commissioned delivery of public sector ‘services.’” However, in this

case they did point out the role of their Revenue and Benefits Department in referring clients to a Christians Against Poverty (CAP) debt advice centre, and that they have plans to do the same for a food bank which is being set up.

Reporting a more limited level of engagement with faith groups, Cheltenham Borough Council said they gave support for faith groups “including providing a venue for various activities for children and young people and arranging cultural events and religious celebrations”.

In response to the survey, the vast majority detailed activities that would not be described as statutory services. A relatively small number either didn't respond to the question or simply answered 'no'. A few councils described engagement with faith groups that was more formalised and which entailed the provision of services. In these cases the relationship between the authority and the faith group is changing, with the impact of legislation – in particular the 2010 Equality Act – being a key factor.

Poole Borough Council showed one of the highest levels of formal engagement with faith groups. In their submission to the survey they said:

*“Many of the large charitable providers which the council commissions have a specific faith ethos including Bridging Communities, which provides community development work in regeneration areas. Pramacare is an example of a Dorset-based domiciliary care charity, which provides a range of professional home care services to local individuals. Pramacare's ethos follows the example of Jesus Christ, who showed care and love in a practical way. As a non-denominational Christian charity Pramacare is committed to helping people regardless of creed, culture, or age. There are also a small number of Care Quality Commission-registered care homes that provide services to people of a particular faith.”*

Huntingdonshire District Council commented that faith groups have provided a local post office. In Warrington the activity of faith groups

extended beyond simply providing activities. In several cases they also act as bodies taking referrals from the local authority – for example to food banks and debt advice centres. One church in Warrington has successfully undertaken a Community Asset Transfer. They now use an old library building which “operates the centre for the wider community and provides linked community and library services including parent and toddler group, book clubs, exercise classes, art classes, marriage support groups, community choir and youth work”.

### **CAP, food banks and Street Pastors**

Three activities of churches were consistently cited across Great Britain. Street Pastors, food banks and Christians Against Poverty (CAP) are activities that serve as models to show how engagement can be replicated in different authorities and how best practice could be better shared in the future. It is notable that they all operate with a common framework, and each local centre is usually a franchise from the national headquarters.

CAP debt advice centres operate out of church premises across the country, often with a group of local churches collaborating together to provide the service. Neither the local branches, nor the national headquarters receive any funding from local or national government. They are, however, often linked to local government through client referrals. Food banks have dramatically increased across the UK in the past few years. Most of them are run under franchise from the Trussell Trust, a national body which grew from a single food provision programme in Salisbury. While food banks do not receive core or ongoing funding from LAs, in several cases we saw that small levels of start-up funding had been granted.

With both of these franchise networks the vast majority of work is done by volunteers who are trained by the umbrella organisation. For food banks, partnership with large supermarkets is a

further key component to their work. Local food banks will often conduct collections outside supermarkets and with the supermarket's permission ask shoppers to pick up a few extra items to donate. This combination of local authority, voluntary sector, and business together with paid staff and volunteers offers a complex but effective way of addressing vital social needs.

In the case of Street Pastors local groups are affiliated to a national network that provides support and training. As well as working with the LA, groups also work with local police forces and others involved in the night-time economy. Doncaster Council stated:

*"Doncaster Street Pastors is a good example of inter-denominational co-operation to work with the police, council and other agencies to, through volunteer support and assistance to people who may be unused to the effects of alcohol and the dynamics of the night time economy, ensure they are able to reach home safely."*

Christians Against Poverty reported that some local centres had encountered challenges when engaging with LAs, but cautioned that this was not representative of most centres' experience. Some CAP centres seem to have good relations with their local authorities and they do get referrals from them, however, other centres say there are questions over CAP being a Christian organisation and that makes the local authority hesitant to refer people to CAP. Such centres have had to win the local authority over and this has taken some patience and perseverance.

This franchising model is an effective way of mobilising volunteers and making practical the goodwill often found among faith communities. The initiative also helps LAs in their interaction with faith groups as they are able to look at what happens elsewhere before agreeing to a partnership or providing referrals. Furthermore, the presence of a national back office that provides services and training for all the local activities reassures LAs that the faith groups are able to deliver what they say they will.

In Lancashire, churches have responded in a variety of ways. One local activist described their interaction:

*"On the whole it depends on the church and their leaders. Some Church of England parishes are very involved in neighbourhood work such as police community meetings and with education through schools. Methodism as a denomination locally has a major social action charity arm and is deeply involved in homelessness services, they are now successfully bidding for contracts with a number of local authorities. In Blackpool and Preston there are strong homelessness forums (and a developing one in Lancaster), led by the wider voluntary, community and faith sector, but linking with councils and involving those churches who do homelessness work. Street Pastors groups generally have developed good links and found favour both with councils and police. A few Christian groups, including a local Pentecostal church, have strong links including funding streams for youth cafe work. A few years ago when regeneration programmes were around there were plenty of opportunities to get involved and a few churches did draw down some project funding. For example The Salvation Army were helped to build a new centre, and a computer suite and community garden were fully funded."*

While the survey found that many of the activities of faith groups were replicated across a wide range of local authorities, it also showed there are a number of projects that have the potential to be scaled up and franchised across the UK. Bury Council identified one such project which could be replicated in different areas:

*"Adopt a Street scheme, whereby a local street is looked after through the weekly cleaning of the streets, inviting residents to meals and the like, with the overall aim being to restore community spirit."*

In Chelmsford, Wingspan<sup>10</sup> is a social enterprise project launched by a church that helps newly-released prisoners into work and provides support

<sup>10</sup> Wingspan project website: [www.communityworks.mobi/page5.php](http://www.communityworks.mobi/page5.php)

to avoid re-offending. The scheme has been so successful since its launch in early 2010 that it is now looking to replicate its model and work with other prisons across the country.

Some local authorities reported a huge range of activities being provided by faith groups. For example in Coventry faith groups provide youth groups and toddler groups, similar to many other parts of the country, but they also provide astronomy classes and dog training. This shows that as well as the replicable and scalable models that enable a high level of engagement between local authorities and faith groups there is also an important role for creative and entrepreneurial responses.

As well as meeting the urgent presenting needs, faith groups also play an important role in supporting the interests and activities of local people. Local authorities therefore need to find a balance between encouraging activities as part of scalable and franchised models and allowing room for innovative local activities.

Faith groups are at the heart of communities and exist for the benefit of all and not just those who belong to the congregations or adhere to the particular faith. While this report is unable to quantify the scale and scope of activity conducted by and through faith groups across the UK, the answers provided by LAs demonstrate that it is undoubtedly significant, varied, and in many communities seen as essential.

Alongside the high levels of faith group activity reported by some local authorities in the survey, it is notable that some LAs reported having minimal or no knowledge of faith group activities in the local area. The use of the term 'service' rather than 'activity' could have affected the responses to the survey. However, given that most respondents cited both informal activities and those that had been commissioned, and some of the shortest answers were simply 'too many to list', it is likely that those that did not (or could not) cite any local faith group activity could be said to demonstrate a lack of awareness about voluntary activity in their communities.

## 2. How do local authorities relate to faith groups?

We have shown in the previous chapter that faith groups contribute a considerable depth and range of activities to local communities, and generally LAs are aware of this work and often involved to some extent in the activities.

We asked LAs to tell us about the type of engagement they had with faith groups, the activities undertaken by those groups and the degree to which the LA partnered or connected with them. To ascertain how LAs relate to faith groups the survey presented a set of questions to discover what formal structures or processes are in place. Other questions explored how individual faith groups relate to larger collective bodies and representative networks.

### What provisions are in place to relate to faith groups?

Most respondents cited some provision for liaising with faith groups. While the precise nature of the relationships varied for each authority, three broad categories emerged:

1. Advisory groups for the council, which faith groups could join. These were often either a dedicated interfaith forum, or a wider equality and diversity network.
2. Officers with engagement with faith groups as a dedicated responsibility. Some authorities cited a specific equality and diversity officer, while others said that the principle point of contact would be through their community engagement or partnership team.
3. A preference for informal relationship-building. This was cited even in cases where, although (1) advisory groups and (2) dedicated officers were often in place, it was felt that informal relationships were more effective.

Twelve local authorities or eight per cent of respondents said they have no structure in place, whether this is a nominated officer, formal body or independent body or some other formalised process.

### The nature of relationships with faith groups

#### Individuals

Less than half the local authorities who responded had a dedicated officer responsible for relationships with faith groups. Sixty-four local authorities cited a specific role, although it was clear that the person described sometimes had a wider portfolio covering all equality and diversity strands. Twelve local authorities declared they had no structures in place to deal with faith groups and another three authorities said they had plans to develop specific roles.

Fenland District Council provides a fairly typical example of an LA that engages with faith groups but does so mainly through formal processes. Within the council the equality and diversity manager has responsibility for handling faith relations and there is also a group of equality service champions who “look at all aspects of service delivery and consider if there could be any negative impact on faith groups amongst other protected characteristics”.

A more proactive approach was evident in Chiltern District Council’s response which stated:

*“The community cohesion officer is supporting faith groups and interfaith groups develop opportunities to make links in the community or between different communities. By directing individuals to organisations for community support or developing organisations to deliver support.”*

A comment about new budgetary restrictions from Blackpool Council was echoed in several of the submissions:

*"In the past, we were able to fund a post and activity specifically focused on faith engagement. This was funded via NRF regeneration monies and has therefore ended after this funding was removed by central government."*

The effect of central government cut-backs was cited repeatedly as a primary reason why local authorities either did not have a dedicated person or why such a post had recently ended. Rochdale specifically cited recent spending cuts as the reason for losing a faith officer post.

Fife Council demonstrated the limited activity undertaken by council employees even where there was specific faith provision. "Policy officer support is provided to the local interfaith group as part of their general equality duties and to facilitate engagement with different equalities groups."

In several local authorities there was not an individual with specific responsibility for faith engagement, but it was acknowledged that officers in a range of roles were likely to have high levels of interaction. Christchurch and East Dorset Council is a good example of this multiple role approach. They said: "Community engagement officer works with all sectors of the community including faith groups." Likewise, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council said: "The strengthening communities manager is responsible for supporting the development of the third sector and has a good relationship with our local interfaith network and with local faith groups."

Durham County Council said: "Engagement with faith groups is embedded within particular job roles eg equality & diversity officers, voluntary & community sector officer, community development/project officers." This response illustrates the typical departmental areas where faith groups interact with local authorities, usually

as a group dealt with through equality and diversity provision or as a stakeholder in voluntary and community development work.

Some local authorities indicated that a key task of the employed individual's role was to increase the capacity and activity of the faith groups. Indeed, Thurrock Borough Council said: "The corporate diversity team works alongside the community development team to increase the capacity of the sector to influence services and deliver services where there is an aspiration to do so."

### **Representative forums, bodies and networks**

In most cases local authorities do not have formal bodies that handle faith issues for the council. Only 30 specifically cited these structures. However, many more LAs did report having relations with informal or independent bodies such as local faith forums or Churches Together groups. In most cases these bodies worked alongside council staff members, suggesting a recognition perhaps that such groups would have limited efficacy without a permanent link. Blackpool Council noted: "We have relationships via the Blackpool Faith Forum and Christian Churches Together. Both are independent of the council, but the council helps the Faith Forum with secretariat support." The London Borough of Camden indicated the same sort of arrangement: "The [community cohesion] officer [also] organises and maintains the borough's Faith Leaders' Forum."

In Camden the activity of the Faith Leaders' Forum extends beyond the normal range of activities for such bodies. Not only does it "provide an opportunity for policy makers across the council and other statutory bodies within the borough to have a faith perspective on their decision making process" it also takes a more active role whereby it is "involved in... policy development and service design activities".

Reflecting the trend noted above toward the loss of dedicated officers due to budget cuts, a similar

impact has been felt on consultative groups. Harborough District Council pointed out that:

*"We had a group called the 'social inclusion network' which consisted of members from all sorts of communities including faith groups. This was led by our diversity and equality officer who is no longer in post."*

Likewise, in Slough: "Several years ago a Faith Forum was established but this has not functioned for some time due to lack of funding and resources."

In addition to the formal internal mechanisms at Fenland District Council mentioned above, it also has a Fenland Diverse Communities Forum, which is independent from the LA but provides input from faith groups. In their response to the questionnaire they cited the main benefit of working with faith groups as "ensuring that all our community has an input into how our services are delivered and that there are no barriers to accessing these".

Some of the organisational arrangements described by local authorities appear slightly complicated. Bolton Council described their arrangements like this:

*"All faith groups are represented on the Vision Steering Group (the Local Strategic Partnership). The Vision Steering Group oversees the delivery of the town's community strategy. Community cohesion is a cross-cutting issue within this and the strategy for this is regularly discussed within the Vision Steering Group. The Stronger Communities Partnership influences and delivers a significant part of the agenda around cohesion – key part of this is the One Bolton action plan that the Faith Leaders Forum lead on."*

Bristol City Council stated that the priority for their Multi Faith Forum was "to be a consultative body for organisations seeking to ascertain a faith perspective on a range of issues" and "to see a greater understanding of faith communities and to see the needs of faith being specifically considered

by major public agencies and major employers". This demonstrates an ambitious remit for the group, extending well beyond handling faith as simply an equality strand or recognising the value to the community that the voluntary activity provides.

For several local authorities we saw that it was not funding that brought engagement to a halt but either a lack of interest among faith groups or an inability to reach a consensus on the group's purpose. In reference to a multi-faith forum that had previously existed, Teignbridge District Council commented: "There was not a clear mandate for its work and the participants did not see a benefit in attending a multi-faith group". Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council likewise highlighted a lack of commitment but noted they were looking to resurrect their faith forum.

In a similar vein Carmarthenshire County Council pointed out: "Although a faith conference was held in 2009 in order to bring representatives of the various faiths together, no consensus emerged concerning moving forward within any representative structure."

### Informal relationships

In addition to specific officers with responsibility for faith engagement, whether as part of an equality strand or via community engagement, the survey also uncovered a wide range of less formalised relationships. It is often through the initiative either of faith leaders or key officials and members of the local authority that such relationships are fostered. For example, Durham County Council cites the existence of an "informal cross party elected members' reference group looking at issues of 'faith in public life'".

South Norfolk Council commented that they did not engage with local Christian groups "formally unless it's through our partnership in delivering local services". North Hertfordshire District Council expressed a more expansive but flexible approach:

*"We not only engage at officer level on specific projects, but also through our members on local partnership activities, through the annual civic reception, council meetings at which such groups are invited to present and seek views of members."*

Many authorities commented that local Churches Together groups or other cross-denominational groupings existed in their locality but had no direct connection to the council. Even so, such groupings did enable the authorities to have a straightforward point of contact into faith communities when issues arose, or when they wanted to consult on specific issues. While such groupings clearly enable simple interaction on the part of the local authority, there is the potential for participation bias in that not all religious groups participate in these forums. Indeed, in terms of multi-faith groups it is often the traditional denominations that are most frequently represented. It therefore requires an intentional focus on the part of either the faith leaders or the local authority to ensure that engagement is not distorted by this participation bias.

As well as asking local authorities about how they engaged with faith groups broadly we also requested information about their relationships with specific Christian denominations and groups. The London Borough of Camden commented:

*"The Community Cohesion Officer engages with Christian groups on an ongoing basis. He has regular one-to-one informal meetings with reverends/pastors/fathers from the different churches within Camden. The churches are also represented on the Camden Faith Forum."*

### Analysis

In our survey of local authorities we found that most LAs make specific efforts to engage with faith groups. However, the fact that LAs engage with faith groups does not mean that such engagement is always good.

Our survey found that the four principle ways that LAs view faith groups are as:

1. providers of commissioned services;
2. a source of volunteers;
3. a statutory equality group;
4. a community group.

To varying degrees, these labels are legitimate; and aside from examples of service provision they are likely to be true for most authorities. However, on the basis of the responses from LAs it is also clear that they do not constitute an adequate description of the contribution of faith groups to the life of local communities. Nor do these categories exist in isolation, because faith groups often fulfil most of these categories at once. So while an authority may deal with faith groups through the lens of equality and diversity policy, the groups are also significant contributors of volunteers. Likewise, while faith groups may provide formally-commissioned services on behalf of the council that does not stop them from being a faith group and therefore both an equality group and a key community agent.

In situations where faith groups are providing services that have been contracted out from the local authority, and if in the future they exercise their 'right to challenge' and successfully bid for the right to provide these services, it is clearly vital the role of faith is clarified. In such circumstances, it is right that faith groups wishing to become service providers go through a proper tendering process and show their capability and capacity to achieve what they claim. However, we are not convinced that any such process should be 'faith blind', and nor do we think that the ongoing relationship with the local authority can be disconnected from their faith.

Where faith groups are principally designated and engaged with as an equality strand this can lead to a reductionist mentality that does not fully grasp the varied and distinctive contribution faith groups make to the life of their local community. It is also plausible in these circumstances that local authorities may consider themselves adequately engaged if they have ticked the appropriate boxes.

## Engagement within Christianity

While the survey focused on religious groups in general, as the All Party Parliamentary Group for Christians we take a particular interest in the relationships that local authorities develop with churches and Christian groups in their area. We asked each local authority whether they engaged with local Christian churches and organisations, and if so which denominations and streams they represented. Out of the 150 responses we were able to compare on this question, the Anglican Church was the most frequently engaged with.

Denomination	Percentage of local authorities engaged
Anglican	54.66%
Catholic	53.33%
Methodist	50.66%
Baptist	44.66%
Evangelical/Pentecostal	44.66%
Presbyterian	29.33%
Other	20.00%

Among those churches mentioned under ‘other’ were: Salvation Army, Unitarian, United Reformed Church, Quakers, Lutheran, and Metropolitan churches.

These results show a tendency among local authorities to engage more with the historical denominations and especially with the established Church. This may simply reflect the scale of

activities that each denomination and stream is involved in, however, in some instances it may also be attributable to a systemic or cultural inability to see ‘new church’ groups as legitimate stakeholders. Without an adequate understanding of such groups it is hard for LAs to determine how to engage with them, and what forms of engagement are likely to be most beneficial.

Even so, it is notable to find that a high number of local authorities are working with newer and less established forms of church, especially among the evangelical and Pentecostal groupings. This is important because these churches are experiencing the highest levels of church growth in the UK, and it is likely that they will have an increasingly significant impact on local communities in the coming years. We acknowledge that it is often those same churches with high levels of growth that represent the most challenging institutional structures for LAs to engage with. Organisational structures are often unclear and concerns about accountability and transparency persist. In this regard it is interesting to note the research supported by the London Borough of Southwark into new black majority churches and planning permission concerns<sup>11</sup>. Research and engagement such as this helps build relationships and develops understanding of how faith groups operate and LAs can best interact with them.

Authorities that did not specifically cite working with any particular denomination described engagement as primarily happening by working through the local interfaith forum and/or working with all churches.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers, Andrew P.(2013) *Being Built Together: Final Report* (London: University of Roehampton).

### 3. Religious literacy

One of the key findings of the *Clearing the Ground* report was that there is systemic religious illiteracy in many public bodies and government institutions. The inquiry found that in dealing with religious issues there was a tendency to resort to simplistic solutions that failed to grasp the nature of religious belief, and the impact this has on adherents' actions.

In this area it is vital to note that religious literacy cannot be restricted to the understanding of formal bodies, or the doctrinal beliefs of religious communities. Religious literacy requires an awareness of the diversity of beliefs and the way that this variance in belief will lead different believers, even within the same faith tradition, to act differently. Some faiths display public manifestation that is relatively simple to observe, understand, regulate and if necessary accommodate. Other beliefs are less focused on behavioural aspects and therefore are harder to categorise.

It is also important to note that religious literacy is not about local authorities becoming experts in the minutiae of every religious and non-religious belief system. This is unrealistic and there are always exceptions and subsets of faith groups that differ to the mainstream. This is not an excuse for not understanding more, but it is an acceptance that understanding will likely always be incomplete. This is also a reason for innovative ways of improving religious literacy that do not rely on the local authority becoming the hub of all necessary knowledge.

A feature of Christianity that was alluded to in the *Clearing the Ground* preliminary report is that at the core of Christian doctrine is the concept of freedom and grace. The inquiry found that this can present problems for secular authorities that require interaction with religions which can be clearly identified and quantified. Unlike other

religions which require the formal manifestation of external, measurable rites that enable adherents to attain differing degrees of status, the Christian concept of grace represents an internal status that requires no practical efforts or formal structures. In other words, the believer is not bound by any religious law – making measurement by secular law very difficult. This means that while there are many habits that Christians have in common, and some which are more or less required by different denominations and communities, the way in which believers express their devotion is not easily defined.

An example of where this has affected the way in which local authorities engage with faith can be seen with marriage registrar Lillian Ladele and her case of discrimination against Islington Borough Council. The council requested that she conduct both civil wedding and civil partnership ceremonies, but Ladele felt that to conduct civil partnership ceremonies would be in conflict with her religious belief in marriage between a man and a woman as the only appropriate context for sexual relationships. This led to Ladele being dismissed from the council following complaints by co-workers. Some Christians while holding to the same orthodox understanding of sexual relationships might be willing to conduct civil partnership ceremonies. However, this does not negate the fact that Ladele's objection to her job being extended to cover these stems from her religious belief. While not finding in her favour the European Court of Human Rights did recognise that her views on marriage and civil partnerships and her request not to carry out civil partnership ceremonies were manifestations of her belief.

Religious illiteracy is not confined to equality and diversity policies, or to the content of training provided to local authority staff. It is perhaps most readily felt through the interactions between local authority staff or councillors and members

or leaders of faith communities. Our survey was conducted to ascertain how local authorities related to faith groups, so the responses focus on how well they perceive that they interact with religion. Consequently, in order to consider whether there was a gap between perception and reality, it was useful to supplement the original research with comments from leaders of churches and Christian organisations.

On a scale of one to five (one the lowest, and five the highest) we asked each local authority two questions on this topic:

1. How well do you think local authority staff understand how to work with different faith groups?
2. How important do you think it is that local authority staff understand religion and religious issues?

The mean score for the first question was 3.36 and for the second 4.19. In virtually all cases the score given to the second question rated at least as high as for the first. The most common response was to score the importance as one mark higher than their current achievement. This represents a broad recognition that religious literacy is important but local authorities see room for improvement. It is partly in recognition of the need for improvement that this report seeks to assist local authorities in better understanding faith groups.

## Understanding religion

Three local authorities scored the importance of understanding religion as lower than their current achievement. Unfortunately, none of these cases provided further comments to explain the rationale behind this perception.

Some of the responses were candid as to the paucity of religious literacy. For example Rochford District Council conceded that it was “difficult to gauge given that staff are not trained to engage with faith groups”. In other cases there was an acknowledgement of an indifference to

understanding religious belief, and a recognition that it was important to understand religion as a functional requirement of equality regulations. Stafford Borough Council were indicative of this attitude. They ranked both their achievement of religious literacy and its importance as two out of five and added: “An overall general appreciation assists the authority to fulfil its obligations in accordance with its equality policies.” Forest Heath District Council gave itself a three in both categories and commented: “As part of the council’s diversity and equality training staff are provided with a basic understanding of the role of different faith groups.” Likewise Chichester District Council said: “It is no more important than understanding a range of equalities issues.”

The limitations of using a rudimentary self-assessment scoring method is perhaps most notably highlighted by authorities that awarded themselves a score of three but demonstrated better understanding than those who gave themselves a score of five. Alongside rating its religious literacy at three and importance as at three, North Yorkshire County Council said: “It is important that staff understand these issues where relevant to support the needs of individual customers and communities.” Furthermore, while seeing religious literacy as very important, scoring a five, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea commented: “The Equality Act has placed a legal responsibility upon public bodies to consider all individuals when carrying out their day-to-day work. Religion is one of the protected characteristics addressed within the Act.” What this response appears to suggest is that understanding religion is important because the law tells us that it is a protected characteristic. This is a very simplistic way to engage with religious belief and faith groups.

Throughout the survey, the requirements of the Equality Act cropped up time and time again. This was particularly notable in regards to the way religion and belief is defined as a protected characteristic. The survey responses show that, while the Act profiles religion and belief as being important for local authorities, it does so

in a manner which often means that religion is dealt with in a mechanistic, structural way. As mentioned in the previous chapter, religious beliefs and the faith groups that are motivated by them, are often engaged with local authorities either through a community and voluntary sector group or an equality and diversity group. The implication of treating faith groups solely as the latter is that it leads to a reductionist understanding of beliefs and the impact they have on their adherents. This is a particularly secularist understanding of religion.

Although the faith engagement of local authorities ranges from informal to formal, it is clear that statutory definitions of the nature of religion are important factors that shape the relationship and ultimately affect the activities of faith groups and delivery of services. While noted as important in official guidance, it is clear that religious beliefs are in fact generally quite vaguely defined. Indeed, when placed alongside other equality strands that are to be treated with equal importance, such a designation renders many of the distinctive characteristics of religion as more or less meaningless. Horsham District Council relays the logic of the law here: "The same weighting needs to apply to all protected characteristics (as outlined in the Equality Act 2010) and people with or without a faith or belief, to ensure there is no unfair disadvantage for one protected characteristic."

The aim is for provision of services and access to local authority facilities to be without preference to religion or belief or lack thereof. As a consequence, the approach often taken by local authorities is to attempt to be 'faith-blind'. Often this means that, in seeking to acknowledge the importance of religion, and then attempting to understand it, local authorities are compelled to effectively ignore it. This happens because the prescriptions that equalities legislation places on local authorities encourages them to consider so many issues, matters and subjects as being equally important, which can render the guidance as nonsensical.

By working within the rigid framework of a policy which says all religion and belief systems must

be considered equally important, faith as a core, motivating identity in civil society is reduced to an homogeneous generic characteristic which everyone, whether by choice or abstention is a part of.

Another consequence of this instrumental understanding of religious belief is that 'non-religious belief systems', or the intentional absence of any religious belief is equated alongside religion. Without questioning the validity or worth of 'non-religious beliefs' it is clear that they are manifestly different from conventional religions in intentions, actions and outcomes, and any attempt to equate them with religion is unlikely to be productive. Bristol City Council typifies this approach whereby religious belief is treated as one of many factors which they need to take account of, stating that it is "very important to ensure we deliver appropriate and accessible services to all of Bristol's communities and meet our Public Sector Equality Duties".

Some local authorities demonstrated a more nuanced approach to understanding religion, or at least recognised that it required a differentiated response. For example, Burnley Borough Council stated: "As residents become more diverse it is important to understand local/national issues and the impact this can have on communities." Similarly Somerset County Council said: "The individual services that provide front line support to the community understand that people have different religions and beliefs and that this informs the services we provide." Suffolk County Council responded: "An understanding of religion and religious issues by staff is important to ensure that we are delivering services in a fair and culturally sensitive manner."

It is notable that in the responses to the survey, most of the discussion relating to the importance of understanding religious beliefs was provided in the context of faith communities and individual believers as service users. Once again this is reflective of the view that achieving equal access is the guiding principle for local authorities and their understanding of religious beliefs. While this is a

legitimate aim, and a worthwhile endeavour, it also demonstrates a limited understanding of the role of religious belief and identity.

We asked all local authorities whether they felt they did enough to understand faith groups. Many commented that they did as well as they felt they could given the limited resources at their disposal. Overall a little under two thirds of those who answered this question felt that they did enough (80 out of 126).

### Training of staff

In addition to asking local authorities how they rated their current understanding of religious beliefs and how important such an understanding was, the survey also sought information about training for staff to better understand religious beliefs. It asked whether the local authority worked with individual faith groups to achieve this.

The majority of local authorities stated that they did provide training on religious beliefs, and in most of these cases it was provided as one aspect of wider equality and diversity training. The initial question asked was: "Do you have any measures or procedures in place to train staff to understand different faiths?" Without attempting to deconstruct the responses too much it is worth noting that in cases where the local authorities appeared to provide similar training sometimes this question was answered yes and sometimes no. For example, Bolsover District Council said: "No – we deliver equality and diversity training for staff and faith is broadly covered". Fenland District Council, however, said: "Yes – race/belief forms part of our equality and diversity training". This is a further indicator that care needs to be taken in analysing the responses, but it also illustrates the category confusion that occurs by treating religion as an element of equality and diversity. As a consequence, it has been necessary to re-categorise responses such as Bolsover's as providing some training for staff in religion and belief. However, it remains possible that some of those local authorities who simply responded 'no'

without any further explanation also provide this level of training but because it is not explicitly or exclusively related to religious belief answered as they did.

The need to train council staff, and in some cases elected members, on matters of religion and belief is usually based on a desire to better understand different religious beliefs and the cultures and communities pertaining to them. This means that local authorities with large, diverse populations often give greater attention to training staff. It also means that the training provided is often focused on understanding the difference between religious beliefs. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets commented: "Diversity training is available to all staff which covers the diversity of our faith communities. We also provide a range of information about the faith communities in the borough on our staff intranet." Context clearly matters, and the nature of the training and resources will be affected by the community it relates to. Surrey Heath Borough Council provides frontline staff with information on the cultural practices of the Nepalese community and places information on their intranet on the Muslim and Nepalese culture.

Administrative issues were also factors in determining the nature of training. Several local authorities noted that the training they provided varied depending on which staff were participating and the needs of their specific role. West Sussex County Council stated: "The County Council and some of its partner organisations offer opportunities to learn about faiths. The need to participate in these courses is identified through service business plans and/or discussions about an individual's development needs." In a similar vein Durham County Council pointed out that "some staff have undertaken more in-depth training for carrying out home visits".

The responses from some local authorities demonstrate innovative methods of providing training for staff and at the same time building relationships with local faith communities. Staffordshire County Council's equalities team "has

commissioned a voluntary organisation to provide 'Faith Trails', which involves taking staff and school children to different places of worship, so that they can gain first-hand knowledge about different faiths".

Faith Trails or similar exercises, which provide an opportunity to see different places of worships, were cited by several authorities as a good way of building relationships and providing information and insight about faith communities. These were generally available but not compulsory for council staff.

*"The council also supports and promotes Diverse Doors Open, an annual event organised by the Multi Faith Forum, which gives people the opportunity to visit a number of churches and a range of places of worship and learn about the many faith communities that exist in Bristol, including Christianity. In 2011 a total of 21 places of worship opened their doors. In addition, five of the 21 venues formed a designated 'Faith Trail', each representing a different faith. At each of the five core venues there were discussions around the issue of 'What can diverse Bristol learn from your faith?'"*

**Bristol City Council**

In a few local authorities reference was made to provisions for council staff on the basis of their own religious beliefs. For example, accommodating holidays or times for prayer. Slough Borough Council said: "The council has a Christian prayer group (founded and led by employees) and all staff have access to a quiet

room for prayer. The council is mindful of religious holidays and events and tries to accommodate staff leave as much as possible."

A key theme that has emerged throughout this report is the benefit of strong, but often informal relationships between key officials in a local authority and the leaders of faith communities in their area. There is only so much that can be learnt through training modules and information placed on council intranet systems and, this is a theme that recurs in relation to training staff and improving the religious literacy of the local authority. Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council observed that: "Knowledge is built through interaction with the interfaith network and the groups associated with it – also through informal dialogue with people from different faith backgrounds." Bolton Council said that "by working with them on cohesion issues, you get to understand the significant issues for them as regards practising their faith".

It is clear that in many cases local authorities work primarily through interfaith forums or churches together networks. This provides a key way to build relationships and to learn about faith groups. However, some faith groups do not engage with these forums, and some Christian denominations are also reluctant. While this can stem from theological concerns about working with other faiths it is often due to more practical concerns such as availability and the usefulness of such meetings. Therefore, the use of such forums could present a skewed picture of the local faith community.

# 4. Barriers to engagement between local authorities and faith groups

Generally, our survey shows that local authorities across England, Wales and Scotland have strong relationships with faith groups and that there is a willingness to build closer links. This report has illustrated the breadth and depth of activity covered by faith groups and the efforts being made by local authorities to create structures that foster good relationships and improved partnership working.

However, the picture is not entirely positive. In this chapter we explore some of the challenges that are most frequently raised in relation to local authority engagement with faith groups. In most cases it should be noted that the challenges were not directly related to specific issues that prevented authorities from working with faith groups, but more commonly they were technical or perceptual barriers that hindered the relationship. Paradoxically, it is notable that the survey also shows how some factors which are seen as the strongest benefits of working with faith groups are also cited as sometimes being contentious or problematic.

As with all reporting of this survey, it is important to affirm caution in the interpretation of aggregated responses because of the potential for response bias. In this section that is particularly acute because it is possible - and even likely - that local authorities that have poor relationships with faith groups did not respond either to the questionnaire at all or to specific questions. There is a further complexity given that religion and belief is now a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act, and local authorities may believe that a reluctance to work with faith groups would be classed as unfair discrimination. This may affect the research by limiting acknowledgments of any significant barriers to engagement.

Some responses from local authorities did not provide detailed information and instead opted

for an often sterile response when asked why they worked with faith groups. Here we look at the responses of several authorities who cited no specific benefits.

Cambridge City Council said: "There are benefits to working with ALL voluntary sector groups and those benefits equally apply to faith groups" (emphasis in the original). Likewise Sefton Council said: "The challenges are the same as for any voluntary and community groups"; and they said the same for the benefits. A second limited way of responding to this question and others referenced the authorities' responsibilities under the Equality Act. Colchester Borough Council commented: "It can also help us to meet the Equality Act's public sector equality duty."

The sterility of these responses about the barriers encountered by local authorities when working with faith groups creates further potential for response bias. In order to provide a more holistic picture of the relational dynamics involved, it is necessary for analysis to draw more heavily on the evidence from those authorities who have a significant level of interaction with faith groups, are committed to working with them, and see a benefit to doing so. This means that, although we are only able to reach tentative conclusions, we can point to authorities that have managed to work through potential challenges.

The barriers fall into three broad categories with a few additional cases worthy of note:

- Capacity of both faith groups and the local authority to achieve closer working practices.
- Issues of structure and organisation (and how this meshed with the needs and legal requirements for the local authority)
- Questions of trust and suspicion that usually emerged out of a concern over what the impact

of different beliefs of the faith groups might be on the working relationship or the provision of services.

### The challenges of capacity

The issue of capacity was identified by many local authorities as posing a significant challenge to building stronger relationships with faith groups. This challenge evidenced itself in two different forms: a lack of capacity on the part of the local authority to realise the potential for more fruitful interaction with faith groups, and a lack of capacity within the faith groups to respond to the opportunities that may exist.

In relation to the structures within local authorities for dealing with faith groups, many respondents indicated that a dedicated faith officer (or similar) post had previously existed, but had gone in the wake of budget cuts. Likewise, some interfaith forums had ceased to exist without an officer to support its work. The survey confirms that recent budget constraints mean there is clearly a capacity limitation at the local authority end of the relationship. Many respondents would concur with Bolton Council, who said: "Local authority funding reductions make this an ever difficult situation." However, others would concur with Theresa Grant, chief executive of Trafford Borough Council, who recently told a gathering of church leaders looking at engaging with civic authorities that the role of churches at this time was of vital national importance.

The survey findings suggest that there are many ways in which faith groups and local authorities interact. In some cases faith groups are formal service providers; in others they receive referrals from other public sector agencies or work in collaboration. So while it may seem more parsimonious to consider relationships with faith groups through the actions of a dedicated officer or forum, it is likely that some of the most fruitful and productive activities between local authorities and faith groups may not occur through these channels.

As a consequence of these differentiated and often complex forms of interaction, there are challenges to developing stronger links because some council departments deal with faith groups as faith groups while other departments may deal with them as they would any other voluntary and community sector group. This means that, in order to improve the relationships, either the structures that are explicitly faith-labelled need development to handle the wide range of activities that faith groups engage in, or other sectors of the local authority need to develop deeper understandings of religious belief.

Many local authorities clearly benefit from and are appreciative of the capacity that faith groups offer. Indeed, the London Borough of Croydon identified the resource of a "huge pool of committed volunteers". Only in a small number of cases was this seen as a potential challenge, with Poole Borough Council seeing a problem with "capacity on both sides, especially around tendering/commissioning contracts and time to build relationships and trust".

The ability of faith groups to maintain a strategic focus was seen by a few respondents as significant in relation to capacity. South Norfolk Council 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." In a similar vein Runnymede Borough Council commented: "It is difficult to engage with some churches as they do not want to be involved in partnership working and wish to concentrate on the members of their congregation only." South Gloucestershire Council said: "[The] main obstacle is the faith groups' own lack of capacity. Their priorities are: to increase or maintain the size of the worshipping community followed by maintaining buildings, other financial pressures and finding volunteers for office within the faith community."

Sustainability and reliability are clearly obstacles to more effective partnerships. The issue of faith

groups having good intentions to provide services or volunteers for activities, but not always being prepared or able to follow through on that intent, appeared in several different responses from local authorities.

From the perspective of local authorities considering more engagement with faith groups, it is clearly important to know whether the groups are able to do what they say they want to do. While positive experiences are always likely to ease these concerns, the experience of authorities such as South Norfolk Council are also likely to foster an understandable reluctance to enter into partnerships with faith groups in the future.

### Organisation

Another major barrier noted by local authorities is the organisational structure of faith groups and their ability to integrate with the processes and requirements that councils operate by. As Thurrock District Council observed:

*“These include limited capacity as well as a lack of understanding about how local government works and how to engage effectively. There is also competition within the sector and a lack of experience relation to the delivery of some services which creates risks to the local authority from a service perspective. A key issue is how we can improve engagement processes so they are not so complex and time consuming.”*

East Lindsey District Council identified the challenge of a clash of organisational cultures that can impact communications and trust:

*“Setting up the working relationship in the first place. We can be perceived as wanting to take over whereas we see our role as enabling and recognise the need for faith groups to retain their autonomy and identity. Where churches do not have a community worker or lead volunteer, it is hard to make and maintain regular contact.”*

While these challenges are clearly linked to the issue of capacity, they also represent a challenge to churches and other faith groups regarding the organisational structures that they use, and the degree to which they are compatible with those of local authorities. Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council highlight two challenges they have faced: “Faith groups are not always constituted, which can make applying for funding difficult – in addition, many funding streams exclude faith related activity so this can make project work difficult to fund.” The issue of whether groups are constituted is open to dispute, certainly in the case of churches as virtually all are legally constituted as charities. The latter claim will be explored in greater depth later, but funding restrictions generally apply to the promotion of beliefs, not any faith-related activity.

Unfamiliarity with the funding structures and procedures required by local authorities, especially when related to the provision of statutory services, can present particular difficulties for faith groups. As more faith groups engage with authorities, these difficulties are likely to become more apparent. However, many of the problems that they present are expected to be resolved as the Localism Act gains traction and community groups increasingly take up their right to challenge the provision of services. The ‘Community Right to Challenge’ enables non-governmental groups to challenge whether or not the local authority is best placed to deliver certain services. As the statutory guidance notes:

*“The community right to challenge paves the way for more communities to help shape and run excellent local services. This might include making services more responsive to local needs, offering additional social value outcomes, or delivering better value for money. It may act as a springboard for radical reshaping of services, or simply trigger small changes that will make a big difference to the quality of service communities receive.”<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>12</sup> Community Right to Challenge statutory guidance available at [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/5990/2168126.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/5990/2168126.pdf)

This means that initially there will be a steep learning curve for many organisations looking to provide services, including faith groups. But it is anticipated that, over time, engagement will improve as groups become more familiar with the procedures of local authorities.

Some churches and faith groups are familiar with handling large budgets and have experience of being involved in logistically-complex projects. For many others, however, the spheres of business administration and local government regulation are entirely foreign and as such they present a substantial barrier to engagement.

A further challenge can be seen in the difficulties faced by local authorities in dealing with large numbers of different faith groups and organisations that might seek to provide services. Aberdeen City Council identified “the large numbers of organisations working without coordination” as an obstacle to engagement.

A substantial number of survey responses suggested that many churches and faith groups are deterred from engaging more formally with local authorities because of a fear they would be pressed into a secular and bureaucratic mould by the often complex legal requirements of partnering. The response from the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames highlights the convoluted bureaucratic landscape faith groups are often expected to navigate:

*“A recent Equality Impact Needs Assessment (EINA) on the draft Emotional Wellbeing Mental Health (EWMH) Strategy (2012), for children and young people identified a need for capturing more data on service users and faith. This is being pursued further as part of the EWMH strategy implementation. Furthermore, Equality and Diversity (E&D) has been mainstreamed as part of the EWMH programme and so each programme board meeting has a standard agenda item relation to E&D (which includes Faith) and there is a designated E&D representative who will be attending every programme board meeting to champion E&D*

*within the programme. Since Faith data has been identified as a key area then this is one of the actions that will be championed, monitored and held to account by the E&D lead. In order for faith groups to be involved in the whole programme it is important that there is an appropriate forum within which they can shape the EWMH agenda. As part of the EWMH programme, we are in the process of defining a comprehensive communication strategy which will include an invitation to faith groups to participate in an EWMH network/forum. This is a forum which will allow people to feed views and relevant factors into the delivery of training around EWMH and services to fulfil the needs of different faith groups. As part of the EWMH strategy consultation, there has been some feedback around the appropriateness of organisations from a religious denomination being able to deliver non-judgemental and inclusive services to the public.”*

Later in this chapter we will consider concerns about beliefs and inclusivity in more detail. This lengthy excerpt from Richmond upon Thames demonstrates the foreign culture that faith groups face when working with local authorities. It shows that, while there is certainly a need for faith groups to become better acquainted with local government structures and procedures, there is also an urgent need for these to be made more accessible to groups wishing to engage. It is worth noting that faith groups in Richmond have built relationships with their local authority, perhaps further showing that informal relationships are more effective than formal structures.

North East Lincolnshire Council show an awareness of the frustration that complicated language and processes can give rise to for prospective partners:

*“Non-political organisations can often be frustrated by the ‘politics’ and the time that is required to move things along. Bureaucracy is seen as getting in the way of the day job and we do everything we can to maintain an open and*

*ongoing dialogue with all partner organisations to steer them through the political process.”*

The ability of faith groups, and other voluntary sector organisations, to comply with the legal accountability and regulatory structures was seen by respondents as another common concern. Carmarthenshire Country Council said: “Voluntary organisations may have limited organisational capacity. This may have an impact on council performance and accountability frameworks where the organisation is delivering on behalf of, or in partnership with, the council (not unique to faith groups).”

There is clearly a challenge for faith groups who would like to do more but are not organised in a suitable way to deliver formal services, or even conversant enough with the language of local government to play a role in wider schemes that might be open to them. While such structures may be necessary for reporting, accountability and transparency practices to be in place if faith groups are delivering services on behalf of the council, for the development of more fruitful working relationships there is a clear need to simplify language and processes.

### Perceptions

*“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**

The most common obstacles to better engagement were perceptions about the intentions and the consequences of beliefs held by religious groups. The survey responses highlighted a spectrum of perceptions, with some relaying legitimate concerns about the nature of faith group activities and others characterised by unsubstantiated fears.

The suspicion of faith groups by local authorities generally fell into three categories:

- 1. Exclusivity** - a fear that the groups were only working for their own faith communities
- 2. Equality and diversity** - a fear that immutable beliefs around sexual orientation would cause insurmountable difficulties
- 3. Proselytisation** - a fear that groups would seek to convert service users to their faith.

### 1. Exclusivity

Several local authorities commented that an obstacle to closer and or more formal working relationship with faith groups was their desire to provide services and conduct activities mainly or exclusively for the benefit of their own community. The previous quoted responses from South Norfolk and South Gloucestershire Councils accord with this perception by alluding to faith groups prioritising internal church activity. This challenge is exacerbated where the faith groups want to provide a service within their own faith, denomination or network that is normally provided through the local authority or other statutory body. Suffolk County Council commented: “Sometimes they are only able to provide support for people within their own faith community.”

South Derbyshire District Council made a similar point, and Tamworth Borough Council said that: “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.” In more ambiguous language Warrington Borough Council

said that in some areas there was a view that services delivered by faith groups “are sometimes not attractive to non-religious members of the community”.

West Lancashire Borough Council said that faith groups “may not be able to reach all of the community, particularly those who do not entertain a faith”. Likewise Cheltenham Borough Council stated: “If a service is perceived to be connected to a faith, it might create a barrier for the wider community.” Cambridge City Council pointed out that “the main challenge is in ensuring that services delivered by faith groups are delivered to people of all faiths and no faith. It is important that the local authority ensures that services are available to all constituents”.

It is notable that in most of the cases where fears of exclusivity were cited, they were not supported with evidence, either of services and activities being restricted or of people of other faiths or none being less willing to participate.

## 2. Equality and diversity

In relation to the perceived problems of local authorities working with faith groups Cardiff Council identified that:

*“Another challenge of working with faith groups could be the conflict between some faiths and some of the protected characteristics, for example, as an equal opportunities employer we promote the rights of LGBT people. This could be in direct conflict with some tenets of different faiths.”*

Horsham District Council said: “Non-Christians may find accessing Christian-based services difficult. Namely people of other faiths or no belief, and some people who come from the LGBT community. The image portrayed by some faith groups to the community is not always inclusive of everyone in the community.”

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea put the challenge in starker terms saying that “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”. One of the blanket barriers identified by Denbighshire County Council was a “conflict of interest between people with other protected characteristics, i.e. sexual orientation, gender reassignment, different faiths, beliefs, non-beliefs”.

In the preliminary *Clearing the Ground* report we noted that a tension exists between different protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act, in particular between religion and belief and sexual orientation (although gender is also affected). There is therefore a legitimate concern local authorities identify which is that some religious groups, including orthodox Christianity, hold a view that sexual relationships should only be between a man and a woman within marriage, and that this could come into tension with alternative views on sexual orientation. However, the route from a doctrinal belief in the appropriate place for sexual activity, to a realisation of some of the fears expressed by local authorities is not as simple as presented.

The challenge for faith groups and local authorities is how to provide the faith groups with sufficient space to authentically live out their beliefs without preventing anyone accessing services because of their sexual orientation. This tension works the other way round as well and this is something largely absent from the responses from local authorities. No response referenced the need to protect religious beliefs from the impact of views different to theirs and what the promotion of these views might mean for religious freedom.

Although responses on this issue were numerous, when examined they appear to be largely based upon fears of what could happen rather than any accounts of what actually has happened. Even so, South Gloucestershire Council did comment: “We have received formal complaints about support to faith groups on the grounds that the belief and actions of some faith groups discriminate against protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.” As this statement was not elaborated and

cannot be substantiated, it is not possible to determine whether the complaints related to the beliefs and actions of a specific group or religion in general, or whether they relate to the use of funds or support from the council.

The internal contradictions of equality legislation mean that there are now unresolved tensions between some religious beliefs and other protected characteristics. This confusion is compounded because those beliefs that conflict in and of themselves are part of a belief system which is itself a protected characteristic.

Despite this confusion, it is reasonable for local authorities to stipulate – as required by the Sexual Orientation Regulations 2006 – that services are provided without preference or regard to the sexual orientation of the user. It is not reasonable for local authorities to selectively review the content of faith groups' teachings or doctrine, whether in the form of sacred texts or contemporary sermons, and then use those beliefs (most notably those that may expound a belief that sexual activity should be confined to a man and woman within marriage) to prejudice engagement with faith groups.

Our survey found that, while there is clearly a level of fear among many local authorities that faith groups may hold views that conflict with their own equality and diversity positions, such views are largely unfounded and should not be prohibitive to working together. In fact, were such perceptions to impinge upon potential partnerships, the local authority would itself be in breach of its own regulatory commitments to work with all groups regardless of their faith or none.

Responses from councils with good working relationships with faith groups suggest that the best way to overcome suspicion and to counter erroneous perceptions is primarily through building relationships of trust. When, through the experience of established working relationships, senior officials and council members have personal knowledge of leaders of churches and other faith

groups, it goes a long way to addressing some of the fear, suspicion and distrust that might otherwise exist.

Darren Paffey, a councillor on Southampton City Council, commented on the growing relationship between churches and the local authority and demonstrated the importance of building relationships:

*"There have been meetings between council officers and church leaders to discuss how youth clubs might be resourced by churches, or voluntary activities run in Children's Centres by the city's Christian community. These are ongoing and they're exploring how that might look, for example, churches 'sponsoring' a Sure Start, or churches providing youth workers and Southampton City Council providing the legal training and development of these workers."*

### 3. Proselytisation

In terms of obstacles to faith groups working more closely with local authorities and providing activities and delivering services, the survey identified a fear among some authorities that faith groups would try and convert people to their beliefs. As with the challenges surrounding equality issues, it seems that there is a significant gap between perception and reality. Therefore, it is important to differentiate fact from fiction in order to gauge whether the beliefs and actions of faith groups are actually a barrier to partnership.

Bradford Metropolitan District Council tersely commented: "Faith organisations may want to use services to advance the interest of a particular faith." 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." Chichester District Council put it most bluntly, describing faith groups as being "actively evangelical, with a missionary agenda to the interactions with clients." Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council registered a similar concern, albeit in a more elliptical manner, stating:

*“They [faith groups] are primarily committed to do what their commitment is rather than the service they are commissioned to do. These are usually compatible but not always. There is a perception from some that we are funding the faith activity rather than the service provided.”*

The London Borough of Harrow said: “The council does not fund activities that promote the adoption of a particular faith or religion. Projects and activities that the council fund need to foster good relations and promote equality of opportunity.” Carmarthenshire County Council described the challenges that they perceive and the approach that they take:

*“Whilst recognising the energy and drive of faith groups, it is important that the position of the Council as a secular institution is preserved. The widely held suspicion that faith organisations may be motivated to provide services in order to achieve conversions needs to be addressed transparently, with appropriate checks or safeguards in place.”*

Many religious systems of belief are committed to the promotion of their beliefs for the purpose of the conversion of others. This is a core tenet of Christianity, but it is also evident in a number other religions as well.

It is generally accepted among Christian groups and churches that local authority funds should not be directed to support core evangelistic activities. Yet, from a review of the survey responses from local authorities, it is clear that a significant number are suspicious of faith groups because of confusion between motives and operational outcomes.

On the basis that religious groups are often evangelistic, but would not expect a local authority to fund this activity, a number of more complex situations often arise. There are situations when religious groups may receive or want to receive funding for a certain project which is non-religious in its nature, but their motivations are a natural outworking of their religious beliefs. The

network of food banks across the UK largely run by churches would be a good example of this – the activity is not explicitly religious but it is motivated and informed by religious belief.

In such cases we see no reason why the faith motivation should obstruct a close working relationship between faith groups and local authorities. The challenge is at its most acute when the provision of a service which is non-religious in its nature is seen to move into a more religious context - even when that religious context is in no way a condition for the provision of the service. For example, in a church that provides a meal for homeless people, at what point does the religious aspect become too central or potentially coercive? The meal might be served in a church hall, and that would presumably not pose too serious a risk of proselytisation. Yet, as might be expected in a church building, the hall may well have religious imagery or texts on the walls. Furthermore, the faith group volunteers may well respond to questions about why they do what they do in religious terms and with an evangelistic connotation. And what happens if a minister or vicar expresses thanks for the food by saying a short grace at the beginning of the meal? All of these things should not be seen as trying to coerce people into joining their religious belief, but rather as authentic, indeed expected, expressions of the belief.

Tackling perceptions of proselytisation clearly requires faith groups to be honest about the motives and outcomes of the activities that they undertake with local authorities. These principles of transparency and integrity enable relationships of trust to be built with local authorities. The challenge for local authorities is to support faith communities in being true to their beliefs while at the same time providing services and activities that are open to all. In relation to the gap between perception and reality that has been uncovered by our survey, it is also clear that there is a need for a substantial educative programme to develop religious literacy.

### The challenge of secularism

One of the challenges that became evident through a review of the responses from local authorities was the default secularism that existed within many of the institutions. This was rarely cited explicitly as a barrier to closer engagement, but manifested itself through the explanation of other barriers which were noted. As the recent Equality and Human Rights Commission sponsored review of religion in public life concluded: "Overall, the landscape is complex and geographically variable; it is not possible to establish a clear trend towards the population or social institutions of Britain as a whole becoming either more or less religious or secular."<sup>13</sup> There are clearly challenges in distinguishing between: authorities who are obliged to operate at a secular level in civil society – assuming a plural approach which adheres to our constitutional framework and is sympathetic to our national identity and culture; and the philosophical doctrine of secularism that seeks to reduce or remove the influence of religion – which assumes the expansion of an atheistic political and ideological creed.

Consequently, it is vital to draw a distinction between the appropriate responsibility for public institutions to not favour one set of beliefs over others, and the efforts sometimes made – purportedly in the name of fairness – which act to remove religious beliefs from the public square. The first approach looks for a secular decision-making process which asks that decisions are made for reasons other than religious beliefs. Unlike secularism, it does not ask that religious arguments are removed from public debate and discussion, but it does require that such arguments are not the sole or deciding reason.<sup>14</sup>

The challenge of this approach is finding a method of discussion, debate and decision-making which allows room for religious arguments without privileging them. In many situations, while local authorities would not explicitly seek to remove religious beliefs from the public square, the impact of their policies and procedures is such that little room is left for them; and faith groups are left feeling they have to quieten their beliefs in order to receive a fair hearing.

This is what we mean when we observe a default secularism, which is sustained by the myth of secular neutrality. We accept that public bodies such as local authorities have secular responsibilities in carrying out their functions in a society with a plurality of beliefs. However, rather than accepting that there are many voices which should speak into public debates, too often this is reduced to one set of beliefs: those of non-religious belief groups such as humanists and secularists. Alternatively it favours those willing and able to quieten or dilute their beliefs in the public sphere. This provides an unintended privilege for the voice of non-faith groups. A further impact of this approach is that in asking religious groups to use non-religious arguments to make their case, they are privileging a decision-making process that is secular and as such may not be supported by all faith groups.

Camarthenshire County Council explicitly stated: "It is important that the position of the council as a secular institution is preserved." We would suggest that the focus of local authorities should not be to become as secular as possible, but to be more truly plural, encompassing a range of beliefs and views and not indicating that religious views are at best tolerated and frequently unwelcome."

<sup>13</sup> Donald, Alice et al (2012) *Religion or belief, equality and human rights in England and Wales* available online at: [www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/research/rr84\\_final\\_opt.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/rr84_final_opt.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> cf Spencer, Nick (2007) *Neither Private nor Privileged* (Theos: London)

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

Throughout this report we have highlighted a wide range of activities and services that faith groups are involved in providing for the wider community. They range from meeting urgent needs to supporting community interests, and these activities form a major component of civil society in the UK. In Chapter One we reviewed the variety of ways that faith groups engage and interact with local authorities to deliver these benefits. In this chapter we look more specifically at why engaging with faith groups is in the best interests of local authorities.

Our survey showed that some local authorities engage and work with faith groups oblivious to the fact they are actually faith groups. This can occasionally be intentional because the authority does not seek to distinguish them from any other group that they work with. Cambridge City Council demonstrated this attitude, saying: "There are benefits to working with all voluntary sector groups and those benefits equally apply to faith groups." However, in nearly all the cases of partnership that were covered in the survey, local authorities were keen to note the distinctive benefits of working with faith groups. Some of the key benefits identified included: the presence of groups within communities; the capacity they bring; their knowledge of local issues; their commitment to the poor and the vulnerable; and their motivation to make a difference. This section draws these benefits together in order to better discern the 'social-spiritual capital' that is distinctive to faith groups generally, and Christian groups and churches specifically.

## Equality requirements

It is worth noting that for several local authorities the main benefit of working with faith groups

was to fulfil the requirements placed on them by the 2010 Equality Act. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea said: "As a result of the Equality Act, the council has a legal responsibility to consider all individuals from all religious denominations." To supplement this mechanistic response, they went on to say that "there is also great value in working in partnership to avoid duplication of engagement work".

While not the only benefit recorded by Bristol City Council it is clearly seen as a key reason for engaging with faith groups. They said: "It also helps the council fulfil its Public Sector Equality Duty around fostering good relations and promoting understanding between people who share a protected characteristic and others."

We appreciate local authorities have a statutory responsibility in relation to religion and belief but when the very act of fulfilling an obligation is cited as a benefit of fulfilling the obligation it is not easy to identify whether any benefits are recognised or appreciated. When equality regulations and legislation are cited as the reasons for meeting them, the purpose of the regulation becomes unclear and any pretensions toward social cohesion appear to be disingenuous. In these circumstances local authorities seem to miss the point of why the law exists – to serve local communities to flourish.

Faith groups not only add value to the work of local authorities, but they also constitute the communities that local authorities exist to serve. Also, the diversity of the faith groups that are partnering with local authorities represents an excellent example of what a free and plural society looks like. Working in some of the most deprived communities in the UK, these groups

provide service that cross cultural boundaries and identities. In doing so, they support the statutory commitments of local authorities to realise substantive equality, and they provide a vital glue for civil society.

### Presence

While this report speaks generally of faith groups, we are aware that our knowledge, experience and points of reference are principally from the Christian Church. Local authorities mostly referenced their replies as relating to faith groups in an undifferentiated manner and we are aware of the need to avoid reading the limitations of our awareness across the field of responses. However, in many areas, it is Christian churches that constitute the bulk of faith groups' activities. In more urban and diverse authorities it is also clear that there are close relationships with minority religious groups and that these are often structured via inter- or multi-faith networks.

Faith groups – and Christian churches in particular – are of great benefit to local authorities because of their diffuse presence in rural, urban and suburban communities, and in every village, town and city of the UK. This historically-rooted presence is primarily a benefit because churches have well-located buildings that can host a variety of community activities. As one council noted:

*“Much of our local Christian heritage can be identified with church buildings, both in rural and urban South Gloucestershire. Along with church halls, these public premises provide a valuable resource for community activities and a focus for social cohesion.”*

A recent report from Theos and The Grubb Institute considered the spiritual capital and positive impact of cathedrals in England. One of the key conclusions was that cathedrals reach out beyond the Church of England and are often “a hub to engage the life of the wider community”<sup>15</sup>.

Another frequently cited benefit of faith groups was the local connections, trust and knowledge they have. Harborough District Council observes: “Faith groups are based within the heart of the local community and are able to identify individuals who may not feel able to come forward and access help and support by themselves.”

Likewise Wychavon District Council commented along similar lines: “They are based in the community and often have a good knowledge of local needs and circumstances and the ability to reach out to the local population.”

Preston City Council commented that faith groups are “close to the ground to the communities they serve, have access to ‘hard to reach’ communities, and have a better understanding and knowledge of communities and their needs”. Staffordshire County Council said: “Their unique ‘grassroots’ position means they are often in contact with communities”. East Lindsey District Council expanded on this benefit: “They are close to the community and come into contact with those in particular need. They do not have the ‘public sector’ label and are trusted by communities.” In Carmarthenshire the benefit of faith groups is that they “are frequently structured into churches which are generally well-embedded within communities”.

There are clearly huge benefits for local authorities working with faith groups who are likely to have a deeper knowledge and awareness of the issues that face people, not only in their own faith community but more generally in their local area. Our survey showed that often faith groups (and their leaders) fulfil a representative role for local communities to local government. As both an information source for the authority and as a provider trusted by the local population, they help to provide a bridging vocabulary in the way that they interpret the needs of local people to the authorities, and in the way that they interpret the available resources of the authorities to local people. Warrington Borough Council observed that “faith groups are often more readily accepted

<sup>15</sup> Theos (2012) *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals* (Theos: London)

within communities and as a result can act as a link with statutory partners. This is important with hard to reach groups where it may be difficult to gain confidences". Lincolnshire Country Council said: "They have a good understanding of communities and provide a useful route into working with some harder to reach sectors of the community". Indeed, Bassetlaw acknowledged that they are "in some regards seen as more approachable than the local authority and trusted".

The survey showed that the presence of faith groups, through historic local affinity, accessible buildings and long-standing relationships of trust, is clearly seen as a significant benefit for local authorities and helps them to achieve what on their own they might not be able to. Tamworth Borough Council summed the value of presence up well:

*"Faith organisations have developed trust with certain members of the community and this trust can be of benefit in activities where the wider community are invited to engage. Many people who are active within a faith group will be willing to participate and contribute to other community based activities."*

### The benefits of capacity

In the previous chapter we noted that capacity is sometimes a challenge for local authorities when working with faith groups. This challenge was principally on the side of the authority in having the time and resources to build fruitful partnerships, but it was also evident in faith groups sometimes being unable to carry out some of the activities and services.

It is clear from the responses of local authorities that the capacity and commitment of faith groups is a real and legitimate concern in areas. However, these concerns are vastly outweighed by the number of authorities who appreciate the benefits of working with them, and in particular in the way that faith groups can augment the capacity of the local authority.

*"The faith sector in Thurrock is growing and vibrant. It includes self-governing organisations, some being registered charities, some incorporated and non-profit organisations. The faith organisations include a great range of size and structure of organisations. The services delivered by the faith sector provide significant community benefit, beyond the membership of individual voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) organisations. . . . The VCFS is in a strong position to act as service providers in many areas that helps to build community cohesion. This includes providing local jobs and providing services to many vulnerable groups for example advice and guidance following marriage breakdown and support to the elderly especially those from marginalised communities. Because of the proximity of the faith community to local residents, our partnership with the sector has been key to building a vibrant and cohesive community in Thurrock."*

**Thurrock Borough Council**

Chichester District Council described the benefits of working with faith groups as primarily being related to "a commitment to helping people, willing and sympathetic volunteer or staff base, often organisationally robust and financially sound and accountable".

Many local authorities specifically identified the large number of volunteers that could be marshalled towards a certain programme or project through partnership with faith groups. The London Borough of Islington said: "Faith based organisations have large numbers of committed volunteers who can offer advice, support and practical assistance."

There have been concerns among faith groups that the government's rhetoric around the Big Society might take advantage of the goodwill and excellent voluntary capacity of faith groups and use them to provide services otherwise withdrawn due to government cutbacks. It is clear that local authorities are increasingly being required to decide which services they prioritise. However, these legitimate concerns should not

constitute any reasons for faith groups not to use their resources to meet real needs. Indeed, it could be said that food banks should not need to exist in Britain today, and people should not be in a situation of having to go without food. In the context of debates about the state foregoing its responsibilities, it could also be pointed out that changes to government welfare provision serve to exacerbate the situation. Nevertheless, none of these concerns can be used to justify disbarring the work of faith groups in meeting urgent needs in some of our most deprived communities. The reality is that, because of social, political and economic reasons, there are large numbers of people who are unable to feed themselves and their families. As a response to this tragic (and hopefully temporary) situation, the work that food banks do across the UK is of immense public benefit.

The capacity of faith groups through volunteers, buildings and organisational structures is a benefit for local authorities seeking to have a deeper and more integrated relationship with the communities they serve.

### **Commitment to work with the poor and the vulnerable**

A common theme in the survey responses of many local authorities was an acknowledgement of the commitment of faith groups to serve the poorest and most vulnerable in their communities. Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council said: "Faith groups care about people and have an absolute willingness to support others where they can." Associating this commitment with local affinity, Runnymede Borough Council stated: "The strength of the churches is their presence in the communities and their long-term work in the parish. This is of particular benefit when working in areas of deprivation." Likewise Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council noted how faith groups "are usually in touch with local need and they often have a strong element of volunteerism within the group".

Thanet District Council said that "faith groups often work with communities which contain the most vulnerable people, or the hardest to reach people and are therefore our most deprived communities", while in Islington they are considered to "enable us to reach vulnerable residents in our most disadvantaged communities". For Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council: "The benefits have been through working in partnership with other organisations to deliver services to the most vulnerable who live here in Merthyr."

It is broadly recognised by local authorities that faith groups commit significant time, resources and energy to helping people who are in the greatest need. Doncaster Council said:

*"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."*

There are clearly huge benefits for local authorities working with faith groups. Our survey has revealed that faith groups are helping those who otherwise might be excluded from accessing services, and are also providing often vital support for deprived and vulnerable communities. In Poole the local authority said:

*"Faith groups can reach a broad range of people from all socio-economic groups and people from diverse backgrounds. They have local history and a sound reputation, as well as experience and expertise to share. They work in localities and are usually community based and have an established and recognised presence. Social action is usually core to their mission. They can be innovative, flexible and light-footed. They have access to resources that other sectors may not – capital/buildings, volunteers and other income streams. Often committed to or are open to partnerships."*

### Social-spiritual capital

It is clear in most of the responses from local authorities that, although the benefits of working with faith groups are obvious, they often cannot be categorised in a simple or straightforward manner. For example, the commitment to serve the most needy is a central part of what motivates volunteers in faith groups. Yet the structures, processes and experience that make partnerships with local authorities achievable do not exist in isolation to this motivation.

While many of the benefits for local authorities in working with faith groups are similar to those of working with any other community or voluntary sector organisations, there are also numerous distinctions.

Furthermore, it is clear that faith groups are more than mere collections of people who for various reasons have decided to conduct charitable endeavours. They have a focus beyond the current, temporal, conditions that people find themselves in, and their commitment is long-term and transcend the social, political and economic contexts that often determine the actions of other groups in society. This is not to disregard the charitable actions pursued for non-religious reasons, but in assessing how local authorities can develop even better working relationships with faith groups, it is vital to understand the spiritual dynamics that motivate people of religion. For example, the historic Christian commitment to the poor and the most vulnerable is a direct outworking of their beliefs, and without some knowledge of the features of this driver any formal relationships will be less effective than they could be. In our survey, the distinctive motivations of faith groups were recognised by several local authorities. Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council said: "The general ethos and values of faith organisations work well with the delivery of community and social services." While Woking Borough Council commented: "People attached to faith groups are dedicated and with total commitment to deliver actions in their communities."

Christians are committed to improving life for their local communities for reasons deeply rooted in their belief system. The motivation is theological, but the capacity is also spiritual. While most Christians have a commitment to see people enter a relationship with Jesus Christ, and while this will always remain a motivational element, the impetus for social action is not confined to this reason or dependent on it. It is not for local authorities to second guess why people are engaging in their communities and serving their neighbourhood. While it is clear that Christians and other faith groups are usually committed to provide services to all without conditions, it is also clear that in response to such expressions of love and service some people may wish, without any coercion, to enquire about their beliefs.

The motivation that guides Christians to serve their community and in particular those who are poor and vulnerable is two-fold.

First, there are clear and compelling scriptural instructions to do so. Most notably this is premised on the belief that all people are made in the image of God and therefore imbued with dignity that must be respected. These Old Testament and New Testament teachings compel believers to action through a sense that worship needs to be fully embodied in love. Regardless of how poverty is caused, whether by oppression, calamity or moral failure, love is a practical response to care for the poor. It is not restricted to aid or relief: these actions extend to political campaigning for better pay and conditions, for the provision of housing, for improvements in health care and education etc. The motivations for these actions are based on the reality that injustice disproportionately affects the poor more than the affluent. Christians have a responsibility to respond to these injustices in every area of their lives and the Bible provides a framework for these responses.

Second, there is a broader biblical narrative that calls Christians to care for the world around them. This relates to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God and the compulsion to demonstrate it "on earth as it is in heaven". In orthodox theology,

the Christian belief and hope for the future is not for a disembodied heavenly realm after the current earth has passed away. As a consequence, motivations are shaped by the sense that it is incumbent upon them to work towards the eventual renewing of the earth as part of the outworking of their belief. This means the world is not the enemy for Christians, but due to innate problems in the human condition it is often in a state of tension. In turn, this means that although the challenges of poverty, selfishness and greed will continue to affect us, they should not go unchallenged. This is why Christians are committed to their local communities. It is why they want to see justice for all people - a world where poverty does not cripple people's lives, where greed does not make poverty entrenched, where selfishness does not make greed the only answer.

Social capital is the term that refers to the thick quality of community relations that compels people to associate with one another, and as a consequence give time and resources for the common good. However, in order to accurately map the distinctive contribution faith groups make, over and above other community and voluntary groups, assessing social capital alone is insufficient to fully understand the nature of this engagement.

For this reason, we suggest that a fuller understanding of the contribution of faith groups would come through a concept of 'social-spiritual capital'. Again, this is not to reduce the contribution of non-religious or a-religious organisations to local communities. It is to suggest that, as the contribution of faith groups to civil society develops in the UK, it will be necessary to devise new metrics and typologies to track and support such activities.

Such an understanding is already used in other government sectors, in particular with regards to overseas aid and relations with the Department for International Development. Ministers and officials have recognised the significant contribution that faith groups make and sometimes their ability to achieve things others might not be able to. Therefore they have taken specific measures to engage with faith groups over and above their basic role as providers of services and aid. This has culminated in the publication of *Faith Partnership Principles*<sup>16</sup> with the former DFID secretary of state Andrew Mitchell and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Concepts of spiritual capital are already in use in reference to international development and could help inform engagement between local authorities and faith groups.

<sup>16</sup> Department for International Development (2012) *Faith Partnership Principles* (London) available at: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/67352/faith-partnership-principles.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67352/faith-partnership-principles.pdf)

## 6. Recommendations

Relationships between faith groups and local authorities are generally good – but they could be even better. This report identifies areas with potential for improvement and concludes by making several recommendations to make good relationships even more fruitful.

Although budget cuts are a critical factor, local authorities are increasingly being given more freedom by central government to organise their own affairs via more budgetary autonomy and less prescriptive guidance. The financial pressures on local authorities will only get more severe in the coming years. Originating in the London Borough of Barnet, the ‘graph of doom’ is now being used in reference to all local authorities. This shows the combination of cuts to local government funding with an ongoing increase in the cost of adult and child social care. The crux is expected to come in 2022/23 when care spending is projected to be greater than the funding available. In this scenario, local authorities will not be able to afford to do anything apart from support such care, and thereafter will not be able to afford to sustain it at current levels. This would mean the loss of funding for libraries, parks, leisure services and all other non-statutory services.

In line with this trend for greater local responsiveness to community identities and needs it is not our intention to encourage a one-size-fits-all approach to working with faith groups. That would be counter-productive because of the diverse religious composition of many local authority areas, and because what works with one group might not work with another. We therefore suggest an overall approach that leans heavily on sharing best practice and encouraging innovation. We believe that there is scope for the government to provide better guidance for engagement, and in failing to do so it is abdicating its responsibility to help the very organisations most able to sustain and renew civil society. In other words, the Big

Society will not be fully realised without faith groups.

More extensive engagement with faith groups may tick more boxes in terms of compliance with statutory guidelines for equality. But we want to encourage local authorities to see partnerships with faith groups as more than a tick-box exercise. The report shows that, although developing authentic partnerships often entails many challenges, such an open, positive and relational approach will be mutually beneficial. The presumption should be to proactively work with faith groups for what they can contribute as committed and valued stakeholders, rather than just working with those who have learned to jump through the appropriate hoops.

### Recommendations for local authorities

#### Informal relationships

It is clear that, while local authorities often prefer to structure interaction with faith groups via officers or formal groups and forums, by far the most effective and beneficial partnerships are built on informal relationships of trust. Local authorities that have fostered this culture of co-operation have realised significant benefits. We therefore encourage senior officials and elected members to intentionally build relationships with key faith leaders. While this will often come through the development of programmes and partnerships it should not be limited to this. Even so, there is a role for regular, formal meetings if they enable the building of informal relationships.

#### Building capacity

Many faith groups are willing to participate in activities and take on responsibilities, which at a time when local government finances are under severe pressure, is likely to be widely welcomed.

However, for these potential partnerships to be realised there is a need for confidence that the arrangement will work. Faith groups need the security of operating with a funding regime that won't be cut off or reduced at short notice. Conversely, local authorities need the reassurance that faith groups are able to do what they are committing to do – that they have the necessary capacity, expertise and long-term commitment for delivery.

It is therefore essential that faith groups seeking to work in partnership with local authorities are given sufficient training and support to understand the requirements of working in partnership with local authorities, and to be able to scale up projects and initiatives as they take on greater responsibilities.

### **Improving and simplifying language and processes**

Faith groups working closely with local authorities will need to become more conversant with the requirements of legal compliance and the inner workings of local government. But there is an urgent need for those structures and the language used by local authorities to become more accessible and inclusive. While churches and faith groups are accustomed to working with committee structures, the survey has shown that they still face significant bureaucratic challenges. Several responses from local authorities included incomprehensible jargon-filled paragraphs and it is unsurprising that, when faced with this often technical and convoluted language, faith groups often prefer not to operate within the formal structures and processes.

### **Local faith groups contributing to training and development for staff**

We recommend that local faith groups are asked to contribute initial training and ongoing development to increase and maintain the religious literacy of local authority staff. There will be aspects of equality and diversity legislation that require more formal instruction, but by using members of local faith communities not only will relationships be developed but the potential for misunderstanding and misrepresenting beliefs minimised.

### **Clear guidance to staff on provision for religion and belief**

Local authority staff must be aware not only of their own provisions to live out their religious beliefs, for example prayer rooms and days off for religious holidays, but also how to accommodate them in their activities.

We recommend that the Department for Communities and Local Government provides basic guidance to encourage smoother working relationships with faith groups. The myth-busting guidance published in March 2010 provides a helpful basis on which this could be developed. Such guidance would also be applicable for many other sectors as well as local government. Failure to do everything possible to maximise these relationships will restrict the potential of the very groups best equipped to respond to increased social need at a time of shrinking local authority resources.

### **Clarify the role of beliefs in activities and services**

We recommend the Government Equality Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government ensure local authorities are aware of the extent to which religious beliefs can play a role in the provision of activities and services. This would ensure that the highly valuable contribution from faith groups is not unduly limited by confusion or political correctness. Alongside a national programme for improving religious literacy among local authority employees, guidance should be issued that expresses a clear understanding that it is legitimate for beliefs to be manifested without implying proselytisation.

### **Reasonable accommodation should be a goal**

We recommend local authorities seek to provide reasonable accommodation of religion and belief wherever possible. An approach should be adopted that allows faith groups to be open about their beliefs and values, and the practices these encourage, rather than emphasise a privatisation of belief. This would provide for authentic religious expression. Although there may be scope for some restriction of religious activities, such

restriction should never be the default response. Religious activities of council staff and faith groups should be publically acknowledged and practical provision made for substantive freedom of religious expression.

Wherever possible local authorities should seek to accommodate the religious activity of both council staff and the faith groups they partner with. Central government should encourage local government to publicly acknowledge and make practical provision for substantive freedom of religious expression.

### **Develop plural rather than secular modes of operation**

Alongside the recommendations for developing religious literacy, clarifying the role of belief, and making reasonable accommodation for religious freedom, steps should be taken to encourage local authorities to operate in an intentionally plural rather than secular mode of engagement with faith groups. Local authorities should be encouraged to publically acknowledge (possibly as signatories to a 'faith charter for local government') that all participants in local authority activities and services come with deeply-held beliefs and convictions (whether they are religious or not), and while these may differ substantially, an open acceptance of the diversity of contributions is ultimately better for the strengthening of civil society and for providing community cohesion, identity and resilience.

### **Best practice should be shared**

We acknowledge the current trend away from central government providing detailed guidance and regulation for local government operation. However, there is still the need for local authorities to develop more effective ways of working with faith groups and we believe this can be assisted through sharing best practice. There is a role for the Local Government Association in collating and sharing this information and for supporting local authorities to give time and attention to improving their engagement with faith groups. Such a resource of information and practical advice would be valuable for reducing the barriers

to engagement identified in this report. It would help develop more extensive and effective local authority relationships with faith groups by providing examples of partnerships that do not entail compromising their beliefs.

### **Measurement and research into local social-spiritual capital**

This report strongly affirms that the involvement of faith groups in their communities and in partnership with local authorities cannot be disconnected from the faith that motivates, sustains and directs their actions. We acknowledge the similarities between faith groups and other bodies in the voluntary sector, but we also see significant differences. We therefore recommend that further research is undertaken to look at the distinctive role that faith groups bring to partnership working. Work by the Department for International Development in their *Faith Partnership Principles* acknowledges the benefits that faith groups bring to their contribution in that sphere. We recommend the Department for Communities and Local Government, together with the Local Government Association, commissions a similar study to assess the contribution of social-spiritual capital in the UK context.

### **Audit of faith-based activity**

The survey of local authorities highlighted significant disparities in awareness of the prevalence and extent of faith groups' activities and services. Those authorities with the best understanding generally learnt on reports, surveys and audits carried out in their community by faith groups to assess their activity. We recommend that such audits are encouraged for all local authority areas and in a standard form to allow for comparison and compilation at a national level.

## **Conclusion**

Local authorities work well with faith groups in many parts of the country but there are many opportunities for greater involvement. There remain barriers to overcome and work through,

and benefits that are yet to be fully realised. It is our hope that by working together and through stronger relationships, faith communities can contribute to the flourishing of neighbourhoods across the UK. As financial pressures continue to re-shape the priorities for delivery and provision of local services, this report represents

a contribution to enhancing the relationships between local authorities and faith groups. We acknowledge that this is the beginning of a larger cultural shift and that it will require time and effort from both local authorities and faith communities to learn about each other and work together for the benefit of all.

# Afterword: Gary Streeter MP

## Chair of Christians in Parliament

In places where care, compassion and charity are most needed, and the arms of the state are retracting due to a lack of resources, it is churches and other faith groups who are stepping into the breach.

What else would they do? Churches have taken this role throughout history, from staying in cities to care for plague victims instead of fleeing to the hills, to providing education and welfare before the state took up the mantle. Churches are, to cite Doncaster Council's response, on the side of the hungry and the poor. They are the ones who get started before funding bids are accepted, and they are those who stick around after they are cancelled.

Even so, although churches, other faith groups and religious charities should be obvious partners of choice for local authorities, this has not always been the case. Too little effort has gone into understanding each other, and as a result barriers – either real or imagined - have arisen to inhibit this vital and vibrant collaboration. Where local authorities and faith groups have taken time to get to know each other, where they have worked together and committed to serve the local community, many of these barriers have fallen by the wayside.

This report outlines ways in which relationships can be improved by providing practical recommendations to local and national

government, and to the Local Government Association. It also illustrates the benefits for local authorities of working with faith groups. It is not only the established Church of England with its nationwide parish system; churches, mosques and temples of every stripe are embedded in all our communities. They are present in the fabric of buildings and the resilience of people committed to making a difference.

We have sought to be honest about the challenges identified by local authorities without being pessimistic. And we want to provide clarity about the opportunities while remaining realistic. This is not a report to sit on a shelf. The recommendations require practical responses to help local authorities build stronger relationships with faith groups.

In the years ahead, local authorities will have less money and greater demands. Faith groups are not there to plug a gap and be co-opted into quasi-statutory services. Nor are they there to simply support or oppose economic policies. Faith groups are at the heart of communities. They always have been, and they will be in increasing numbers in the future. I encourage all local authorities to do all they can to build the strongest possible relationships and make the most of this vast and positive resource. Not least because, enhancing relationships with faith groups will make a difference to people in the greatest need.

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# Appendix – Councils responding to survey on interaction with faith groups

**In addition to the councils below several responded but requested their response was not made public.**

Aberdeen City Council	East Ayrshire Council
Adur and Worthing Councils	East Dunbartonshire Council
Allerdale Borough Council	East Hampshire District Council
Aylesbury Vale District Council	East Lindsey District Council
Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council	East Northamptonshire Council
Bassetlaw District Council	East Renfrewshire Council
Birmingham City Council	East Sussex County Council
Blackpool Council	Exeter City Council
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council	Falkirk Council
Bolsover District Council	Fenland District Council
Bolton Council	Fife Council
Bristol City Council	Forest Heath District Council
Broadland District Council	Gloucester City Council
Burnley Borough Council	Gravesham Borough Council
Bury Metropolitan Borough Council	Hampshire County Council
Cambridge City Council	Harborough District Council
Canterbury City Council	Havant Borough Council
Cardiff Council	Horsham District Council
Carmarthenshire County Council	Huntingdonshire District Council
Central Bedfordshire Council	Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council
Cheltenham Borough Council	Lancashire County Council
Cherwell District Council	Lincolnshire County Council
Cheshire West and Chester Council	London Borough of Camden
Chichester District Council	London Borough of Croydon
Chiltern District Council	London Borough of Enfield
Christchurch and East Dorset Councils	London Borough of Harrow
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council	London Borough of Islington
Colchester Borough Council	London Borough of Tower Hamlets
Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar	London Borough of Richmond upon Thames
Conwy County Borough Council	Manchester City Council
Corby Borough Council	Melton Borough Council
Coventry City Council	Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn / Isle of Anglesey County Council	Middlesbrough Council
Denbighshire County Council	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
Derby City Council	North Ayrshire Council
Doncaster Council	North Dorset District Council
Durham County Council	North East Derbyshire District Council
	North East Lincolnshire Council

North Hertfordshire District Council  
North Lincolnshire Council  
North West Leicestershire District Council  
North Yorkshire County Council  
Northampton Borough Council  
Northumberland County Council  
Nuneaton And Bedworth Borough Council  
Oadby and Wigston Borough Council  
Oldham Council  
Plymouth City Council  
Poole Borough Council  
Portsmouth City Council  
Powys County Council  
Preston City Council  
Reigate & Banstead Borough Council  
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council  
Richmondshire District Council  
Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council  
Rochford District Council  
Rotherham Borough Council  
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea  
Runnymede Borough Council  
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council  
Sefton Council  
Sevenoaks District Council  
Slough Borough Council  
Somerset County Council  
South Ayrshire Council  
South Derbyshire District Council  
South Gloucestershire Council  
South Kesteven District Council  
South Lakeland District Council  
South Norfolk Council  
South Ribble Borough Council  
South Staffordshire Council  
Southend Borough Council  
Spelthorne Borough Council  
St Edmundsbury Borough Council  
Stafford Borough Council  
Staffordshire County Council  
Stevenage Borough Council  
Stoke-on-Trent City Council  
Stroud District Council  
Suffolk County Council  
Surrey Heath Borough Council  
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council  
Tamworth Borough Council  
Teignbridge District Council  
Tendring District Council  
Thanet District Council  
The Highland Council  
The London Borough of Sutton  
Three Rivers District Council  
Thurrock Borough Council  
Torbay Council  
Torrridge District Council  
Vale of Glamorgan Council  
Wandsworth Council  
Warrington Borough Council  
Warwick District Council  
Waveney District Council  
Waverley Borough Council  
West Berkshire Council  
West Dorset District Council  
West Lancashire Borough Council  
West Lindsey District Council  
West Lothian Council  
West Sussex County Council  
Weymouth and Portland Borough Council  
Wiltshire Council  
Woking Borough Council  
Wokingham Borough Council  
Wolverhampton City Council  
Wychavon District Council  
Wyre Council



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