All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

2012 Summary Report

Introduction

The Programme

- Welfare to work
- Children and Young People
- Health and Wellbeing
- International

Common Themes

Introduction

FaithAction approached the Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP in April 2011 with the idea of an All Party Parliamentary Group to explore the role that faith plays in society, particularly through the work of faith based organisations.

The group held its inaugural meeting in January 2012 after receiving a large amount of support and interest from parliamentarians that wanted to be a part of the group. The group discussed the rough programme for the APPG and the terms of reference.

The officers were confirmed as the following, with FaithAction maintaining a secretariat role:

Chair: Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP

Vice Chair: Sharon Hodgson MP

Vice Chair: Lord Tariq Ahmed

Vice Chair: Tim Farron MP

Vice Chair: Baroness Neuberger

Vice Chair: Lord Boswell

Vice Chair: Baroness Sherlock

Secretary: Gary Streeter MP

Treasurer: Lord Indarjit Singh

The aims of the group were confirmed as:

1. To promote understanding of faith based organisations engaged in social action in the UK and recognition of their value;
2. To highlight the social, civic and spiritual capital that faith based organisations contribute to communities throughout the UK, and to identify and promote best practice among organisations.
3. To consider regulatory and legislative arrangements which can make the most of the potential contribution of faith based organisations;
4. To learn from and contribute to international conversations, policy and civic action on the contribution of faith based organisations.

The programme

The group's officers agreed that there would be five meetings in the first year, each on a particular topic of interest. These will be:

1. Welfare to work – to take place in March 2012
2. Children and young people – to take place before summer recess 2012
3. Health and wellbeing – to take place after summer recess 2012
4. International – to take place after summer recess 2012
5. Evaluating groups work – to take place after all above topics are covered to re-evaluate the group

For each meeting, FaithAction put out a call for evidence to its members, other networks and key partners asking for individuals to make contact if they wanted to present at the group. FaithAction put a list of those organisations to Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP's office and speakers were then selected.

Speakers presented for 5 minutes on their current work, the barriers they face as a result of being either a faith based organisation or a voluntary sector organisation and, and suggestions of how parliamentarians could help.

Welfare to work

The group's first discussion topic was on Welfare to Work services with 6 groups presenting: Nishkam Centre, BG Job Clubs, Jericho foundation, Faith Regen Foundation, Spear and London Citizens.

The main feedback from the group was that a number of those involved in welfare to work services were not able to get involved in the Work Programme. This was either because of the payment by results set up or the heavy focus on outcomes, which did not suite the ethos of the organisations. One presenting group was involved in the Work Programme, however they were unable to share too much because of their current contract.

A number of groups were still helping individuals into employment, despite not being funded for it. These groups suggested that because of their community involvement they were still the organisation that individuals went to when in need. They also commented that attention needs to be paid to the whole person, not just to the benefits/need model that is often presented. It is only then that whole families can be brought out of poverty.

When asked what programme had worked best in the past or present, groups commented that the Future Jobs Fund was the best programme to help individuals into employment. One presenting organisation, commented that the Social Return on Investment for someone involved in the Future Jobs Fund was £4.50 per person to every £1 spent. The Ethnic Minority Outreach programme has also worked in the past, which worked to partner Job Centre Plus and the local community.

Children and Young People

The second meeting of the APPG was based on the theme of children and young people. The groups represented by presenters were the Hawthorne Project, The Pathway project, The Institute Alternative School, Faith Relationships and Young People, Jewish Lads and Girls Brigade and TLG.

An issue which surfaced during this meeting concerned the lack of involvement these projects had with local authorities; whilst social services and other stakeholders were willing to give referrals, engagement rarely went any further than this. One presenter commented that their project was often used as a 'dumping ground' for young people. Organisations found problems amongst funders who are nervous about proselytising, "have prejudices inspired by political correctness".

This hesitancy to work with faith groups was a common theme running through the meeting. One presenter described how there was often scepticism over whether services were 'professional' despite the organisation being Ofsted registered, while another organisation found that there was hesitancy about working with a single-faith group even though this group was successfully filling a gap left by statutory services.

The reluctance of stakeholders to engage with faith groups meant that organisations were often compelled to move their faith-ethos further down applications so that they 'didn't put people off'; there was a strong feeling that the passion which inspires faith-based work was not understood. Presenters emphasised that faith cannot be taken out of faith-based work, as projects become unauthentic and lose the force which drives them.

The discussion also highlighted the large number of volunteers and resources which 'come with faith', as well as the underlying values which drive the work.

Health and Wellbeing

The APPG met to discuss Health and Wellbeing in October. This meeting included presenters from Parish Nursing, Jewish Care, YMCA England, Faithworks Wessex/Pramacare, Peepal Care and Langley House Trust.

During the discussion it was suggested that there was a need for faith groups to develop their understanding of 'what it means' to be involved in local communities.

Organisations echoed the concerns of previous APPG discussions; that despite showing good results they felt that funding applications had been rejected because the organisation was faith-based. The theme of volunteers was also revisited, as organisations highlighted the large number of volunteers who take part in their projects and enable their work. The time-banking method of volunteering was questioned as it was seen as unsuitable for some faith groups.

Lastly, Jewish Care spoke of their struggle to express the faith needs of a local community to local authorities in a way which was understandable – this had been in an area which had a 20% Jewish population. This echoed the concerns described in previous APPG meetings, where those in authority lacked an understanding of faith or faith motivations; a 'religious illiteracy'.

International

On December 4th the APPG met to discuss the work of Faith groups in an international context. Presenters were joined the group from Sewa International UK, Eliminate Domestic Violence Global Foundation, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Khalsa Aid, Lifeline Network International and Muslim Aid, and academic Francis Davis.

The humanitarian aid organisations present highlighted how places of faith, such as Temples, Churches and Mosques 'come into their own' in times of disaster and crisis, in terms of financial donations and resources. Organisations also highlighted the key role played by volunteers in their projects.

Many of the presenters spoke about the faith values which underpin the work that they do and how a faith-ethos guides the practices of their organisation (for example, Muslim Aid does not charge interest on microfinance loans). A presenter representing an international network of faith organisations drew on this theme of underpinning values, highlighting that the organisations in their network are not 'career' NGOs. These organisations have a deep commitment to their communities and will "provide services whether there is money or not".

The presenters challenged government departments recognise the importance of strengthening civil society as well as other types of infrastructure, and to engage in civil society and Freedom of Religious Belief in the areas they visit.

The 'International' meeting of the APPG concluded with a discussion on the significant gap that exists in research with regards to the work of faith-based organisations. It was emphasized that this type of research is key to discovering innovative and successful initiatives which may otherwise go unnoticed. These initiatives can provide the basis for new models and solutions to societal problems when fed into government policy. Evidence was presented through the example of the Austrian 'bank for the unbankable'; a successful project which drew on this type of research.

Common themes which surfaced through the APPG included:

- Many faith-based groups are working with local communities in the long term and will continue to serve the need even when funding is not available.

- The resources that come with Faith-based organisations include a large base of volunteers, resources, and a motivation and drive to do the work that they are doing which is unique to faith groups.

- This 'faith logic' is a difficult thing to articulate to local authorities.

- Local authorities and grant-making bodies often seem cautious and uneasy about faith playing a part in service delivery. This results in many faith-based organisations downplaying the role of faith in their work.

- Taking the 'faith' out of 'faith-based' work would result in a lack of integrity as it takes the heart and driving force out of these initiatives

- There is a gap in the research on initiatives and solutions that faith-based organisations bring to their local community.