

All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

Birmingham Faith Groups Visit

February 18th 2013



In 2012, Stephen Timms MP launched the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Faith and Society was established to explore the practical contribution that faith makes to society, to identify best practice and promote understanding of the innovations of people of faith.

FaithAction is the secretariat for the APPG for Faith and Society. It is a national network of faith-based and community organisations working to provide support, advice and training for its members, as well as partnering with local and central governments to highlight the contributions made by these organisations to their communities.

Summary

On February 18th the Rt. Hon Stephen Timms MP led members of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, including Jim Dobbin MP, Sir Peter Bottomley MP, Lord Sheikh and Baroness Kathleen Richardson, on a visit to Birmingham to explore how faith –based initiatives are promoting wellbeing and providing services in the city.

APPG members visited Birmingham Central Mosque, Central Synagogue, and Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (Gurudwara), where they spoke with faith leaders about their experiences of providing services in the city, the strong role that each of these institutions took in leading community activities and the barriers they faced.

The trip also provided a chance to see several projects in action; whilst a visit to the Nishkam Civic Association parliamentarians were able to visit the Sikh Gurudwara, a place of worship where over 1 million meals are prepared and served free of charge by volunteers very year, the Nishkam Community Co-operative, a timber manufacturer and joiner where ‘work is worship’, and the multi-faith Sikh ethos Nishkam Primary School.

As well as speaking with local faith leaders, parliamentarians met with city council members and several faith based organisations working within the city. Through these discussions they were able explore the role of faith based groups in the city, the experiences of commissioning services to these groups, and the barriers that they faced in their work.

“Birmingham is a city of striking religious diversity, and also of very good relations between the different faith communities. There are a number of valuable initiatives being undertaken by groups based in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, and examples also of collaboration between people from different faith backgrounds.

Our visit to Birmingham helped to illustrate that there is a growing movement of faith-based social activism around the country, and a growing range of projects, which should be better known and appreciated.”

- Stephen Timms MP, Chair of APPG on Faith and Society

Context

Birmingham is the country's second city. Its council has a £2 billion budget making it larger than some departments of state. Any national economic recovery will require economic renewal in Birmingham and other major cities and regions as much as from the centre for it to be sustainable.

Birmingham is one of the nation's most diverse cities; its religious and racial communities cannot simply be written off as a 'cohesion problem' given extensive contributions to voluntary action, a distinctive response to the 2011 riots, very warm collaboration between the communities following 9/11 and the high civic profile of some leaders both in their own right and as leaders of economic and social initiatives.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society visited Birmingham with the aim of identifying:

- The lessons can be learnt from these experiences;
- The insights can they feed to national conversations;
- The ways in which the APPG might provide a platform for innovative faith-based approaches to community service.

Birmingham Central Mosque



Birmingham Central Mosque is the second purpose built and one of the largest mosques in Western Europe, which was built in 1969 and opened to the public in 1975. The most inspiring value of this mosque is its Multi-denomination position which means it does not belong to any one particular sect or school of thought but it represents all Muslims from any background.

Discussion

The APPG was welcomed into Birmingham Central Mosque by Chairman Dr. Mohammad Naseem, and Dr Abdul Rashid, Treasurer for the mosque.

Birmingham Faith Leaders Group

The origins of the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group lie in the response to acts of intolerance perpetrated by a minority, upon Muslims and some other religious communities in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. As leaders of various religious communities in the city of Birmingham came together in 2001 to stand with the local Muslim community against bigotry, ignorance and hatred, they defined the fundamental principle that an attack on any faith is an attack on all faiths.¹



This group has been running for 12 years and now means that faiths are connected beyond their own communities.

Financial Independence

The APPG heard that the mosque does not seek government money and is financially independent, replying on the support of its members. They have a friendly but independent relationship with the council; their lack of financial dependence allows them freedom to disagree with council decisions when necessary.



¹ In a statement by the Birmingham Faith Leaders' Group on the Balance of Freedom and Responsibility in Society, October 10 2012

Working in the community

Birmingham Central Mosque runs services and projects which can benefit anyone in the community, regardless of their faith, one of the recent projects taking place in the community was a youth clean-up project. The mosque also runs an evening school, under the umbrella of Birmingham Community Education and Training Services (BCETS).

The discussion highlighted the unhealthy emphasis and fixation of the media on terrorism – and the important role of faith institutions that foster relationships within the community and create accountability.



“The friendship we have between us as people of faith, the outcome of that, must be a strengthening of society and the common good, because that is what we [as people of faith] have in common.”

- Lady Richardson

Birmingham Central Synagogue

The Birmingham Jewish Ashkenazi Orthodox community was established in a private house in Belgrave Road in 1883, moving several times before a small group of individuals acquired the large plot of land upon which the current Synagogue, hall and classrooms now stand. The membership spans a great range of ages and aims to cater for them all, from the very young Toddlers' service to the teenage youth activities to the retired ladies' and gentlemen's programmes.

Birmingham Central Synagogue is the beacon of modern orthodoxy in the West Midlands and welcomes people of all levels of observance to a warm, friendly and hospitable community.



Discussion

The APPG was welcomed to Birmingham Central Synagogue by Rabbi Chanan Atlas - Rabbi of the Synagogue and community, Michael Abrams (Treasurer), Enid Korn (Vice-Chairman) and several other members of the synagogue.

Barriers

Members of the synagogue emphasized that what happens in Israel influences the Jewish community in Birmingham – e.g. protests outside events

There have been some acts against Synagogue like vandalism, and issues for teenagers at secondary school where there is a history of bullying.

Working in the community

King David is the local Jewish primary school, located in nearby Moseley. It achieves very high standards and has a co-operative, multi-cultural atmosphere. Around 25% of children are Jewish, whilst the majority are Muslim.



Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha and Nishkam Civic Association

In a visit to the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha and Nishkam Civic Association Parliamentarians were able to visit the Sikh Gurudwara, a place of worship which also contains the Guru's kitchen - where over 1 million meals are prepared and served free of charge by volunteers very year. Connected to the Gurdwara is the Nishkam Community Co-operative, upholding the philosophy that 'work is worship' – showing faith through work and practical services.

Members of the APPG were also able to visit the multi-faith Sikh ethos Nishkam Primary School; opened in 2011 as one of the first flagship Free Schools under Micheal Gove's new scheme. In 2012 the Nishkam Education Trust opened a Nishkam High School and Sixth Form.

Lord Sheikh went on to comment: "I was most impressed by how work is being done on the ground level amongst the community, which is appreciated. The Nishkam Centre is a role model and perhaps, others can follow what has been done here.

"We cannot be complacent and we must ensure that this cohesive work continues to be undertaken."

Baroness Kathleen Richardson said: "The friendships that we have between as people of faith, the outcome of that must be a strengthening of society and the common good because that's what we have in common."

Stephen Timms said: "I was very impressed by the Nishkam Primary School, I thought that was beautiful. The emphasis on teaching values to young children at the beginning of their school life is very valuable and impressive. "



Meeting with other faith leaders, city council members and members of faith-based organisations.

The first in afternoon meeting brought together several faith leaders who had not been represented in the morning visits and members of Birmingham City Council to speak about the role of faith and faith-groups in the city, and the relationship between faith groups and the city council.

The discussion revolved around the role of faith-groups as service providers – the part that they play in bringing a sense of 'belonging' and creating a point of trust in the city was highlighted. It was suggested that the government is often uncomfortable with tackling long term inequalities, and that the work and perspective of faith groups is part of the solution in this area in particular.

"We may have the confidence to engage with the city, but the city has to have the confidence to engage back, and reciprocate that, and say 'We can see your long-term vision, we can see your track record, and we're happy to work with you.'"

- Faith group representative

Birmingham City Council Cabinet Member for Social Cohesion and Equalities, Cllr John Cotton said: "The Council is working ever more closely with faith communities as part of our drive to deal with inequality and disadvantage and I look forward to showcasing that work. The very fact that the All Party Parliamentary Group is visiting Birmingham reflects the incredible work already being carried out by our faith communities."

The All Party Group also met with a number of local faith-based organisations, who drew attention to the vast number of day-to-day services provided by faith groups free of cost to their communities, which provide vital support to many throughout their lives. Faith communities can bring a point of trust and often have high levels of community legitimacy. The multiplicity of Faith communities in Birmingham, each offering the opportunity to 'belong', was also highlighted – faith communities bring a point of belonging, thus areas of greater faith diversity create places of greater belonging.

APPG members also heard about some of the barriers which face these organisations in the area of service provision. Some organisations felt that faith institutions were seen as 'second class' as providers of services, easily neglected in involvement until 'tough times' and a lack of



other resources causes them to be sought out.

The role of faith groups as long term institutions in their communities, and often key points of trust and belonging, mean that they are ideally placed to deal with long term needs and inequalities – the faith organisations present were able to demonstrate this through the wide variety of projects that were currently taking place all around the city.

Stephen Timms MP said: *“We were looking for ideas today and we found some good inspiration for our work in the next few months.”*

Daniel Singleton, National Executive Director of FaithAction, the secretariat for the APPG said: *“We are delighted to support the APPG, we hope that through this group we can raise awareness of the fantastic work of faith based organisations that we at FaithAction witness on a daily basis.”*