

The Faith Covenant: Update April 2016

Introduction

The Covenant is a set of principles for joint working between local authorities or other commissioners and local faith-based organisations. It is built on the recognition that in order to meet the challenges the country faces, we need to unlock the potential of every part of civil society to contribute – including faith groups. The Covenant was developed by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, for which FaithAction provides the secretariat (see www.faithaction.net/work/faith-covenant).

The local areas currently covered by the Covenant are: Birmingham, Leeds, Northamptonshire, Solihull, Barnet and Calderdale. Over the course of 2015-16 FaithAction has been working with Birmingham, Leeds, Solihull and Barnet. The aim is to help these areas to implement the Covenant principles, by facilitating greater joint working and engagement by faith groups in shaping local services, including health and wellbeing.

This report summarises the key themes and lessons learned from this process so far. It then gives updates in the form of case studies looking at the current situation in the areas with which FaithAction has worked this year.

Key themes

- **Time** – Implementing the Covenant in such a way that results in practical action takes a great deal of time. It requires stakeholders both on the side of the local authority and on the side of the faith groups to be made aware of the Covenant and to see its benefits, which might mean a number of meetings over the course of several months to allow for proper consideration and debate, and for relationships and trust to be built up. The more stakeholders involved, the longer the process takes.
- **Persistence** – The fact that people are busy, and that personnel within both local authorities and faith groups change roles and move on, means that messages about the Covenant need to go out not once but many times, and regularly.
- **Expectations** – Local authorities and faith groups need to be able to articulate what they can offer, and to learn what they expect from each other.
- **Points of contact** – It is helpful to have clear points of contact on both sides, who can be approached with ideas, suggestions and questions.
- **Champions** – People are needed who can champion both the Covenant and the actions that it brings about, both for local authorities and for faith groups. Ideally there should be more than one champion in each organisation, so that processes do not stall should a champion move on.

- **Faith and the voluntary sector** – One of the aims underlying the Covenant is that local authorities engage with faith-based organisations on the same basis as they would with other voluntary and community (VCS) organisations. It is encouraging that some councils are taking steps to ensure this is happening.

Lessons learned for FaithAction

- Engaging with stakeholders takes time, and each area has taken a different approach to engaging with the parties involved. Some areas are happy to proceed once certain groups are in the room, whereas others aim first to consult with everyone who could be affected. Regardless of the approach, it is rightly a priority for local areas to ensure good engagement with stakeholders as a precursor to practical action.
- In order for the Covenant to have weight and meaning, the details of its implementation need to be decided at local level rather than by an 'outside' party. This means that although FaithAction's focus is on encouraging faith groups to become involved in shaping health services, the issues that faith groups and councils agree on together must take priority. It has transpired that there has been some focus on issues such as safeguarding which do have clear implications for health and wellbeing.
- Adoption of the Covenant does not happen in a vacuum – it is of course affected by societal and political events, and changes in local situations and personnel. Such developments will inevitably have an impact upon when and how implementation can happen.

Case studies

Birmingham

Background

The Covenant was signed first in Birmingham, the largest local authority in Europe, at a launch in December 2014. This was a relatively small event and was not attended by all faith communities. A larger event was then held in September 2015 as part of the Covenant development process. This event identified several examples of existing joint working between faith groups and the Council or other statutory services:

- Chaplaincy: health services have allowed chaplaincy services of all faiths to be based in GP surgeries so that patients can talk to faith representatives. The Nishkam Centre (a Sikh group) chaplaincy course brings in people from all faiths and communities to learn together.
- Birmingham Jewish Community Care: this provides sheltered accommodation and a full range of care including palliative care, resourced by a mixture of charitable, BCC and NHS funding and paid-for services.
- Ladywood Hunger Project: this fed and helped 120 families, working with local Councillors.
- Trojan Horse response: faith communities worked together to challenge the negative narrative around faith.

The event also identified that a barrier to joint working was a lack of clarity for the faith groups as to whom they could approach at the Council.

Implementing the Covenant

As part of its current work, Birmingham City Council has made efforts to **engage with a wider network of faith organisations** than it had in the past, guided by the Covenant. To help with this it has launched a Faith Network, as a key consultation forum for all its service provision and a vehicle for taking the Covenant forward. Membership has gone from around 15 to 67, with faiths represented that were not in the past.

The Covenant has triggered a greater level of involvement by faith communities in consultations run by Birmingham City Council, and in shaping services.

The Council has also created the Birmingham Faith Map, a tool to help the Council and faith communities connect with each other. This details the activities run by faith communities and the groups they support, and currently has more than 650 entries (www.birminghamfaithmap.org.uk).

A further development meeting was held in February 2016 to help implement the Covenant and share issues and information between the Council and the faith sector.

The focus of this meeting was on **keeping children safe**, since this was one of the issues raised by the faith communities and is a priority for Birmingham City Council.

The meeting was an opportunity to understand more about the procedures required under section 11 of the Children Act,¹ to explore the crucial role that faith communities play in keeping children safe, to celebrate the positive contribution of faith communities in the city, and to share best practice on issues of common concern.

The Council arranged a link with Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board (SCB), members of which facilitated the evening. The faith leaders present were encouraged to utilise the latest guidance developed specifically for faith-based organisations.

Future activities

As a result of the abovementioned meeting, a series of further events across the city has been planned, offering specialised support, training in online procedures, and multi-agency training for professionals working with children, families and communities. The SCB will work with faith leaders to develop the programme for these events. Another two Faith Network meetings are planned focusing on other issues, to be confirmed.

Satpal Hira, Partnership and Community Engagement Team Leader at Birmingham City Council, says that the Covenant has triggered a greater level of involvement by faith communities in consultations run by the Council, and in shaping services. He has spoken to the Health and Wellbeing Strategy development team about including faith in their mapping processes, following a suggestion at the September event that there could be joint working with faith groups on particular health issues, such as diabetes and prostate cancer. The Council is also engaged with the Birmingham Council of Faiths in its existing work on Faiths, Health and Wellbeing.

The Council has also provided advice and support to other local authorities interested in adopting the Covenant.

¹ Under section 11 of the Children Act, faith groups need to have appropriate arrangements in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and councils have a duty to ensure that any services they contract out have regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Leeds

Background

Leeds adopted the Covenant in March 2015. Leeds City Council had taken part in a piece of research undertaken by the University Leeds looking at Religion or Belief and the Big Society. Participants from both the third sector and the Council raised questions about their relationship. There was a lack of awareness of what both sides could and would do in terms of the provision of services and the role of faith organisations. The Council took the decision to develop a local Covenant to provide clarity and reassurance to both sides in terms of what they could expect from the relationship and to break down some of the cultural resistance to working together.

Implementing the Covenant

The initial signing of the Covenant was a small event and the Council's priority now is to ensure that the Covenant is reaching further into communities, with more faith groups signed up to it – the target is to have 100 groups involved. A further aim is to change attitudes about the relevance of the local authority to faith communities.

The situation in Leeds has progressed from one of limited understanding between the Council and faith groups to one in which the faith communities are beginning to understand what the Council can do for them and how its services affect them.

Activity to put the Covenant into practice is driven, from the Council's side, by the Equality team within the Citizens and Communities directorate, and is overseen by a steering group made up of representatives from the Council, faith groups and universities. The aims of this group are to improve engagement by faith groups with the Council (for example, through participation in consultations) by ensuring that they are appropriately trained and equipped; to improve faith communities' understanding of funding mechanisms; and to link the faith sector better with the rest of the VCS.

Practical steps that have been taken so far have included the provision of **training** by the Council for faith groups in how to engage with its services and in consultations. Public health officials are in the process of developing **guidance for engaging with places of worship** as a way of helping to improve health among Black and minority ethnic groups. A funding grant was secured to enable the Council to begin work with faith institutions to allow them to become **centres for reporting hate crime** – in the hope that this will also help to build up long-term relationships with faith groups.

In the view of Geoff Turnbull, Senior Policy and Performance Officer in the Equality team, the situation in Leeds has progressed from one in which there was a resistance within the Council to working with faith groups, while faith groups had the view that the Council was entirely secular, to one in which the faith communities are beginning to understand what the Council can do for them and how its services affect them. The Covenant has acted as the strategic document and driver for this change.

Dr Simon Phillips, chair of Concord (Leeds Interfaith Fellowship) says that faith communities agree with the Covenant as a concept, but that implementation is still at an early stage, and what it will mean in practice is a difficult question that is still being grappled with. His ideas to help with this include more conversation within local congregations themselves, to win the hearts and minds of individuals, and more effort to engage with young people, such as through social media.

In the opinion of the Revd Canon Sam Corley, chair of Leeds Faiths Forum, the Covenant is bringing a much wider cross-section of people from faith communities to the table than has been the case in the past. It is causing them to think about the extent to which they really represent the communities they serve, and challenging them to do better at this in their representations to the Council.

Challenges

As elsewhere, the experience in Leeds has been that much time is needed to raise awareness of the Covenant and build momentum. For example, it has taken around a year for the Covenant steering group to develop clear aims. Engagement with the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities has also been challenging as these faiths do not have overarching councils or other bodies within the city through which to communicate.

Future activities

Engagement between the Council and faith groups is being developed on two levels: the strategic and the representative. A high-level, strategic group has been formed including – from the Council – the Leader and Deputy Leader, the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive, the Lead Member for communities and equality, and area leaders; and from the Leeds Faiths Forum, representatives from the six main faiths. This group will meet in the summer and early autumn of 2016.

In late 2016 or early 2017 there will be a larger meeting at which a number of representatives from each faith group, including both faith leaders (e.g. those with preaching roles) and representatives of faith-based organisations (i.e. those with ‘secular’ roles) will meet with politicians and Council representatives from 12 key services, including public health. The main theme of this meeting is likely to be cohesion. This is to be a high profile event, which will give members of the public from faith communities the opportunity to offer feedback on how the Council is doing and to challenge it to do better. This event was originally planned for March 2016, but as numbers of registered delegates were low, the event was postponed to allow more time to build relationships and trust with faith communities.

The approach of having both a smaller, high-level group and a wider, more representative group aims to address the challenge of the need to decide on and implement strategic action, while gaining representation across an extremely diverse faith sector.

Solihull

Background

Several factors led to the adoption of the Covenant in Solihull: the active interest of the Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP, a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, which developed the Covenant; the production of a Cinnamon Faith Action Audit in Solihull;² and an existing relationship between the Council and an active multi-faith forum, which supported the idea.

The Covenant was signed in Solihull on 21 September 2015. At the same time, FaithAction helped to facilitate a dialogue between faith groups and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (SMBC) about how both the faith groups and the Council could help faith groups sustain and grown their role in communities. The ideas suggested at this meeting included:

Increased engagement by faith groups in strategic dialogue with the Council has been the main impact of the Covenant in Solihull so far.

- SMBC to highlight needs that faith groups could help to meet, or joint opportunities
- Opportunities for communities of faith (e.g. the Sikh community) to talk to public services about issues of concern within their communities, such as diabetes
- A joint, coordinated approach to the refugee crisis, e.g. a 'buddy' scheme, fostering, Islam awareness

The offer from the faith groups included: volunteers who are not limited by funding; specialisms that can dovetail with Council organisations; signposting to other services as well as direct help; and a 'safe haven' for people who present in a crisis.

This was the first Covenant agreement to be explicitly a partnership agreement, rather than a bilateral arrangement between the Council alone and faith groups. West Midlands Police have been a particularly active partner, seeing the benefits of engagement with faith groups for community guardianship and community cohesion. As part of the Partnership Governing Board, the local Clinical Commissioning Group, secondary care trust and mental health trust have also signed the Covenant.

Implementing the Covenant

Sarah Barnes, Partnership Programme Manager at SMBC, believes that the main impact of the Covenant so far has been the increased **engagement of faith groups in strategic dialogue**, allowing them to have an influence on policy in areas of concern to them, and also allowing the Council to engage better in dialogue with faith groups. There is also potential impact in that, in Sarah's view, the steering group of Solihull

² www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk/cinnamon-faithaction-audits

Faiths Forum has been bolder in approaching the Council with requests, citing the Covenant.

Specifically, the role of faith-based organisations in **safeguarding** was identified as an issue around which the Solihull Faiths Forum would like to develop dialogue and strategic influence. SMBC therefore facilitated conversations with the managers of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Safeguarding Adults Board, and are now drawing those from the faith groups with active involvement in safeguarding together for further discussions with the safeguarding boards.

The faith groups also wanted a greater understanding of the **planning** process and how they might be involved in influencing planning in order to build stronger communities. SMBC has therefore arranged for the Head of Planning to speak with faith groups at an event to mark a year since the Covenant was signed.

Challenges

On SMBC's side, the greatest challenge it has faced so far is in communication about the Covenant throughout the Council. While notices went out through staff briefing systems at the time of signing, there is a need to keep awareness of the initiative in people's minds.

On the other hand, the Solihull Faiths Forum newsletter distribution has risen significantly since the Covenant was signed, indicating a willingness by faith groups to be engaged in joint working. A representative of the forum says that the faith groups still have further capacity and expertise to offer the Council. The Covenant will continue to provide a framework for this engagement.

Future activities

The Community Safety Partnership and West Midlands Police have expressed the desire for greater dialogue with faith groups on opportunities for them to play a role in keeping the Borough safe, such as through the Neighbourhood Watch scheme, or involvement in local parks, so this is an area of potential joint work in the future.

Barnet

Background

Barnet is the most populous borough in London, with a growing and diverse population which includes the largest Jewish population in the UK. Barnet signed the Covenant in September 2015, the result of many months of dialogue between the Council and Barnet Multi-Faith Forum (BMFF), which promotes the celebration of cultural diversity, advocates for free speech and promotes social action projects. From the Council's perspective, the Covenant represents a strategic fit with Barnet's Corporate Plan and commissioning model, and will enable it to engage better with the strategic network of faith and community partners to implement the Plan.

Barnet Council is focused on ensuring that faith is involved in its community participation and engagement activities on the same basis as the wider voluntary and community sector.

Implementing the Covenant

Barnet is taking the following action to implement the Covenant, with the aim of releasing the potential of faith communities to contribute to community cohesion, participation and engagement, commissioning activities and strategic influence.

1. Strategic voluntary and community sector forum

The Council and BMFF have a longstanding relationship through Barnet's Communities Together Network (CTN), which has been cemented through the Covenant. The CTN's remit is now being broadened to develop a VCS strategic forum. The VCS forum will be a key strategic link for the Council, enabling dialogue, the sharing of commissioning priorities and the promotion of opportunities for co-production. The forum will engage with local groups, organisations, community workers and other partners to identify local issues of mutual interest and need, and work collaboratively to find solutions. BMFF will be a member of the forum's steering group and an important partner in relation to community engagement. Its participation will be as an equal community partner with the VCS, as part of the Covenant's commitment to influence borough strategy and link with decision-making processes.

The CTN will link to:

- *The Community Assets Strategy* – setting out how over 140 community buildings will be used
- *A comprehensive VCS database* – of 1,400 local organisations, so that residents can find local support and reduce demand on statutory services
- *A resident volunteering programme* – to support more people to volunteer in priority areas such as parks and adult social care

2. Community participation and engagement, and commissioning

Barnet's commissioning model envisages a greater role for community partners in establishing the need for, and the design and delivery of, local services. The Council is keen to ensure that faith is represented on key voluntary and community sector bodies. BMFF and FaithAction will become key partners on community participation and engagement, alongside Community Barnet and Groundwork.

BMFF is involved in the design of new leisure facilities in the borough and focus groups have been held with different faith groups to promote inclusion and ensure different cultural needs are considered.

The Council is working jointly with BMFF to build the capacity of faith volunteers, and together they have identified that health and wellbeing is an important area for focus. They are exploring involvement in the SPIRIT programme, which engages faith communities in promoting health and wellbeing through giving energy-saving advice, and combating social isolation.

3. Community Cohesion

BMFF is already a key stakeholder in supporting community cohesion and the counter-extremism agenda through the CTN. It is also a member of the Barnet Resilience Forum, working in partnership with Barnet Emergency Planning and Community Safety, as well as community cohesion partners including the education, fire, police, health and ambulance services and the Red Cross.

Future activities

Barnet strategic partners and BMFF are collaborating on a Unity of Faiths festival planned for September 2016, which will highlight the work of faith in relation to several public health issues of interest to Barnet communities.

A specific issue that the Council and BMFF have discussed is the future of the 'meals on wheels service', which the Council has been considering changing or decommissioning.³ It is recognised that this service is not just about providing food, but that it represents a vital opportunity to increase wellbeing and reduce isolation for those it reaches. BMFF has been conducting some research among faith communities in the borough, to determine whether decommissioning the service would have an impact on them or their clients and whether there is an offer that faith communities could make under the Covenant. FaithAction has offered research and administration support for this work.

³ <https://barnet.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s27167/Home%20Meals%20Service.pdf>

Esmond Rosen, Chair of the BMFF, says that under the Covenant, the Council knows that it has the engagement of the faith communities, and the BMFF knows it has a seat at the table in discussions. He believes that the Covenant needs support at grassroots level, locally and nationally in order for it to result in concrete action, and that the London faith forums have a particular role in promoting it.