

APPG Faith Covenant Forum Tuesday 4th July 2023

Attendees

Esmond Rosen, Barnet	Mahmooda Qureshi, Birmingham
Stephen Vickers, Birmingham	Haroon Ravat, Solihull
Sadia Khanzada, Brent	Timothy Tofts, Southampton
Jacquetta Gomes, Westmoreland and Furness	Rita Leighton, Southampton
Sophie Jordan, Office of Afzal Khan	Amrick Singh Ubhi, Birmingham
Cllr Aga Dychton, Watford	Adiba Rashid, Bradford
Chris Brown, Brighton and Hove	Surinder Jassi, Birmingham
Geoff Sweeney, Derby	Deepak Naik, Coventry
Archbishop Jerome of Selsey, Brighton and Hove	Cllr Muazzam Sandhu, Barking and Dagenham
Jay Anderson, Leeds	Andrew Welsby, FaithAction
Hilary Barber, Calderdale	Jeremy Simmons, FaithAction
Nadia Khan, Brent	Matthew Allen, FaithAction
Ambrose Omoma, Southwark	Daniel Singleton, FaithAction
Ian Day, Calderdale	Jenny Hadgraft, FaithAction

Minutes:

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

- Welcomed attendees and explained that Sir Stephen Timms MP was unable to join on this occasion.
- Reflected upon past signings of the Faith Covenant, adding that 25 local authorities have signed up so far.
- Looked back at how partnerships were forged during the pandemic, noting that ‘faith is not just for crisis’ and that cross-sector partnerships are vital.
- Raised that Faith in Partnership Week is in September, with more details to follow in the meeting.

The Bloom Review

Jeremy Simmons, FaithAction

- The Bloom Review is a large and comprehensive review, commissioned in 2019 but delayed by the pandemic.
- It received over 21,000 responses to the call for evidence.
- It contains 22 recommendations across 8 broad themes: faith and society, faith literacy in government, education, prison and probation, armed forces, faith-based extremism, faith-based exploitation and religious marriage.
- FaithAction see the review as a broadly positive articulation of faith-based social action. It highlights successful partnerships throughout the pandemic and makes recommendations for embedding this further. However, the review should have had more of a focus on faith working in partnership with the wider public services (e.g. NHS), and the review placed a greater weighting on problem areas of faith, rather than the constructive potential.

- FaithAction believe that a more rounded picture can be provided by looking at the findings of the review alongside those of the Kruger report and both Keeping the Faith reports.
- One of the recommendations is that every local council should have signed up to a 'Faith Charter' by December 2023 – an ambitious deadline.
- This recommendation is welcomed in principle, but there is a potential for confusion, as the Faith Covenant is already well established, and any Charter should build upon the learnings from Faith Covenant work and the expertise of the people and areas involved.

Matthew Allen, FaithAction

- Discussions with department officials indicate that although faith new deal work will continue, their priorities are likely to be directed towards tackling problem areas and how faith groups can be mobilised to change this – rather more than a holistic approach that sees faith as an asset.

Invited attendees to reflect upon the following areas:

1. Any comments or reflections regarding the Bloom review?
2. Has the Bloom review/recommendations shaped any thinking or action at a local level?
3. As Covenant signatories, would you support the submission of a joint letter to DLUHC offering support to any further development of partnership policies?

Discussion, chaired by Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

Archbishop Jerome of Selsey, Brighton and Hove

Any Faith Charter or similar should be statutory and not dependant on whatever government it is. Faith communities need to be consulted as mandatory and any Charter would be permanent and concrete.

Chair – This is similar to the notion of a Faith Commissioner, as per Keeping the Faith report.

Nadia Khan, Brent Council

82% of Brent residents have a faith. Brent Council is working with faith groups around climate change, but it is very difficult to embed this working in all areas – the council have only engaged with faith groups just before Covid-19. How can we raise awareness of review such as the Bloom review to those 'at the top'?

Chair – Interesting to hear as Brent signed the Covenant way before Covid-19 – may be some offline conversations to be had.

Hilary Barber, Co-chair of Inter Faith Network and Calderdale area faith rep.

Welcomes any review on faith – but mentions of religious nationalism has not been welcomed by everyone. The Bloom Review may shape strategic borough thinking, particularly on faith literacy in the workplace and education. Calderdale was very early to sign up to the Faith Covenant and renewed in the last year – it gives a fresh impetus and ammunition.

Jacquetta Gomes, Westmoreland and Furness

Bloom Review is helpful for raising awareness of faith, but concerned about removal of funding from organisations such as Inter Faith Network – this would be a huge loss. It is a good idea to have national legislation but need to be realistic about the differences in local areas.

Geoff Sweeney, Derby

Derby is in the process of developing a Faith Alliance. The Bloom report is to be encouraged but doesn't go far enough, and is clunky in its descriptions of different faiths. Disappointed that partnership working doesn't feature heavily enough.

Chris Brown, Brighton & Hove Council

The review does not use an intersectional approach – it doesn't look at where people of faith may also be experiencing disadvantages based on other protected characteristics, e.g. disabilities or LGBTQ+. Is there a way to encourage a more intersectional experience approach?

Chair – It is hoped that the work on faith literacy should cover this – those different overlaps and how that is worked through is part of understanding how faith works in different parts of the country.

Amrick Singh Ubhi, Birmingham

Agrees that the review is to be welcomed but that it is the work of one person through their own lens and some of the perspectives are naïve. It is easy to highlight things that are issues, but this takes away from the great work and harmony that exists elsewhere.

Esmond Rosen, Barnet

The Review is a missed opportunity for government to understand the vital importance of grassroots organisations and inter faith bodies. This work is valuable, and the work of faith communities was not recognised. Angry that organisations like IFN have lost their funding and what this means in political terms.

Faith in Partnership week

Matthew Allen, FaithAction

- During September 2022, FaithAction launched three different reports that looked at partnership working with statutory partners.
- Worthwhile endeavour to repeat again this year to keep faith and partnership on the agenda and to share good practice.
- We will send updates over the next couple months, with ideas for activities that areas could hold during the week.
- We are considering holding an in-person Faith Covenant Forum, to give people the chance to share stories, good practice and network to build relationships. We are provisionally planning this for 14th September, in Birmingham.
- Unfortunately there is no funding attached to reimburse any travel.

Other Updates

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

We are considering the idea of a 'Book of Good' – an online resource for Faith Covenant areas to contribute to with blogs, videos etc. that would be an accessible way to highlight the positive work that is happening.

Archbishop Jerome of Selsey, Brighton and Hove

Could FaithAction consider setting up an interactive platform for Covenant areas, for each other to interact and share ideas?

Nadia Khan, Brent

Invited all to a Faith Climate Action Plan session with Brent Council on Mon 24th July – also showcasing faith and climate change exhibition and action pledges.

Challenges & Priorities

Geoff Sweeney, Derby

Our current challenge is how to sustain an infrastructure for faith partners to fulfil their full potential.

Hilary Barber, Co-chair of Inter Faith Network and Calderdale area faith rep.

Many local authorities have no money left. Elected members are having to make the hardest decisions in their life...faith communities need to step and be alongside elected members as their decisions impact on the frontline.

Close of meeting

Daniel Singleton closed the meeting, and thanked attendees for joining.