

APPG Faith Covenant Forum Meeting, Wednesday 10 October 2021

Attendees:

- Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP
- Asmina Remtulla, Barnet
- Es Rosen, Barnet
- Hadiya Masieh, Barnet
- Amrick Singh Ubhi, Birmingham
- Cllr John Cotton, Birmingham
- Marcia Wynter, Birmingham
- Peter Rookes, Birmingham
- Steve Botham, Birmingham
- Violet Owen, Birmingham
- Anne Kittappa, Brent
- Danny Maher, Brent
- Archbishop Jerome Lloyd, Brighton & Hove
- Rik Child, Brighton & Hove
- Andrew Lowing, Essex
- Stan Keller, Essex
- Geoffrey Turnbull, Leeds
- Jay Anderson, Leeds
- Cllr Peter Kelly, Preston
- Malcolm Craig, Preston
- Muktar Master, Preston
- Penny Craig, Preston
- Colin Smart, Solihull
- Pat Wilkinson, Solihull
- Jason Murphy, Southampton
- Paul Woodman, Southampton
- Ali Gordon, Office of Stephen Timms MP
- Daniel Singleton, FaithAction
- Matt Allen, FaithAction
- Jeremy Simmons, FaithAction
- Andrew Welsby, FaithAction
- Jenny Hadgraft, FaithAction
- Heather Ratnarajah, FaithAction

Visitors:

- Marek Lubelski, Luton Council
- Peter Adams, St Marys Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (Luton)
- Mahmood Mohammed, Bradford Council
- Alessandra Sciarra, St Vincent de Paul Society
- Yvaana Reid, Life Spring Assembly
- Karl Wightman, UK Baha'i Community
- Jenny Kartupelis, Faith in Society
- Trevor Howard, Churches in Communities International
- Anjana Shelat
- Louise Landman
- Shirin Abdulhusein

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, Chair of APPG Faith & Society

- Thanked people for joining the meeting.
- Highlighted that the meeting is an ideal space to show how the covenant is working in practice and hear exchanges about faith and local councils.
- This is the first meeting since the launch of the [Keeping the Faith](#) report which demonstrated that remarkable things happened during the pandemic – there was a big increase in number and depth of relationships between faith groups and councils.
- A survey commissioned and sent to all councils, of which half replied, showed that two out of three councils reported an increase in partnership working and that 91% rated the relationships as very positive or positive.
- He urged nationwide adoption of Faith Covenant in a government debate last month. A call for evidence before the debate got responses from all faiths, showcasing community spirit and pastoral support among many other things.
- Hopes that many more councils and faith groups will adopt the Faith Covenant given the past twelve months.

Daniel Singleton, National Executive Director FaithAction

- Thanked Stephen Timms for his leadership and attendance at the meeting.
- There is the sense of a change of mood around faith and statutory services – the question is now “why shouldn’t we sign a Covenant?” rather than “why should we?”

Rik Child, Brighton & Hove Faith in Action

- Doing lots of work around homelessness with other partners.
- Partners on Street Support – a website with an app that lists services for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The database is online so is available for all – can be accessed at a library or smartphone. Organisations can enter their own data and keep it up to date.
- Also formed a partnership with Faith in Action, churches, a local healthcare provider, local charities and the local authority.
- Lots of work around the vaccine uptake in BAME community. High percentage of faith communities from BAME background. Fr Jerome, chair of the group, trained as a vaccination champion – a great way for people of faith to contribute to roll out clear communications and dispel myths. Good communication channels existed for this due to running programmes to combat faith hate. Also recruited BAME community leaders to promote uptake.
- Having weekly leadership briefing with leaders in the council and other voluntary organisations plus NHS to get updates for cascading information.

Councillor Peter Kelly, Preston City Council

- Signed Faith Covenant two and a half years ago and it is working very well for two-way communication between the council and faith groups.

- Pandemic has shown how using the Covenant and having clear protocols has really benefitted. Meetings are regular with faith representatives and other groups such as public health easy to arrange and access due to the Covenant protocols.
- An example of work is that of university students from India that could not access money so work through the Faith Covenant helped to feed them, this only happened because of relationships with all of the communities.

Mukhtar Master, Muslim Covenant Lead for Preston Faith Covenant

- Elected Covenant lead for Muslim community.
- Covid hit – and the Covenant came into its own, faith reps were able to work closely for occasions such as Ramadan and Eid with the council. Also made cascading of information easier.

Stephen Timms MP

- Interesting that Rik and Peter highlighted how pandemic highlighted role of faith and the Covenant. These groups represented in Covenant have turned out to be the institutions that were instrumental in mobilising many volunteers.
- Faith groups have the proved best way of getting information to parts of the community that councils can't reach.

Questions & Comments

Q: How do we stop the Covenant from being just a document on a shelf?

Peter Kelly: The Covenant brings accountability to the council to engage and it is now part of what will inherently happen, not just a covid response. Councils are responsible as are the faith groups. It is a two-way thing.

Es Rosen: Covenant is successful in borough but always concerned if elected officials change – new people should be inducted on the Covenant. (Peter Kelly: It is part of the induction process for all new staff at Preston City Council).

John Cotton: Birmingham was one of the first to sign the Covenant and aligns it with wider objectives to keep it action focused on issues for example health inequalities.

Amrick Singh

- The pandemic saw faith communities filling a void that was impossible by statutory services alone.
- Need to look at what worked well and how can it be documented and how to make it part of the DNA of towns moving forward.
- Important to capture what has worked – relationship building and trusted faith networks. Trust and confidence can be passed on like a baton and ingrained in how we do business for faith and council – onus is on both parties.

Marek Lubeski: Luton has strong relationships with faith partners and they want to look at having the Faith Covenant to build on these relationships. Interested in advice for pulling

structures together and insight into developing leadership beyond the usual people, e.g. young people to widen participation.

Penny Craig, Preston Faith: Forum already had people together so network existed, Covenant has given opportunity for two-way work. Need unity built in for Covenant to work.

New Deal with Faith Communities

Cllr John Cotton, Birmingham City Council:

- Long and robust tradition of faith and council working together in Birmingham.
- Shared agenda on community cohesion and equalities – the Covenant codified a lot of this work but has strengthened and deepened the relationship.
- The Covid crisis has driven innovation and the response broke down barriers to get support to people. They have a formal strategic partnership with voluntary sector – a joint recovery framework that connects the work of faith communities.
- Action focused approach – public health messaging, challenging of myths, work of funerals etc.
- New deal - working towards how to draw on learning for a refreshed Covenant and working with faith groups to put new mechanisms into place. Need to be sharper and refined and working with FaithAction to see how to do in practice.
- Challenge is to turn spirit from 19th century into the 21st – this has to be the ethos to drive forward for both a local and national new deal.

Es Rosen, Barnet Multi Faith Forum

- Not interested in new deals but old deals – working together for society is not new concept for faith communities – need recognition for value, flexibility and the adaptability to respond and react to events.
- Faith groups bring best values out of councils, bringing experience and understanding that cannot be monetarised but worth millions.

Questions & Answers

Stephen Timms: Birmingham was great start for Covenant. Politics needs to be renewed and rebuilt. The values that faith communities bring should be part of renewing politics as a whole. Seen dramatic increase between councils and faith groups due to pandemic. One of quotes from the survey from a council Chief Executive commented on the professionalism of faith.

Dr Peter Rookes: Radio programme fortnightly used to connect reps of local authority, charities and faith groups. Keeps faith in the forefront all the time.

Daniel Singleton: There are some recurring themes – energy around the relationship, and a good handover between council teams if there are changes.

Cllr John Cotton: When people change it can be an issue so needs imbedding with a formal mechanism, a body or network to drive the work forward, regardless of who holds portfolio. The crossover to wider work helps to embed.

Jay Anderson: How does this work for faith groups that tend to operate out of people's homes such as minority faiths?

Stephen Timms: It's emerged that faith groups have the unique capacity to mobilise people and those meeting in homes can do just as well as anywhere else. Willing to deliver food, talking to lonely, etc All the things that made a difference – so hope is that home-based faith can contribute alongside everyone else.

Muktar Master: Big fear is that it will fall by wayside after Covid ends. What binds people together? Faith plays a big part and can communicate with such a lot of people that others can't – needs to be recognised by government.

Penny Craig: Faith communities last bastion of trust in society. Government has form but spirit comes from faith communities. Partnership of working together more important as problems becoming deeper and deeper. Not as much for the voice women – this must be improved for real levelling up.

Daniel Singleton: Thanked people for attending.