

APPG Faith & Society: Faith Covenant Forum Meeting, 1:30pm-3:00pm, Wednesday 23 February 2022

Attendees

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, Chair	Deborah Smith, Wolverhampton
Alisdair Gordon, Office of Stephen Timms	Pat Wilkinson, Solihull
Malcolm Craig, Preston	Lloyd Cheshire, LB Barking & Dagenham
Cllr Nweeda Khan, Preston	Asmina Remtulla, LB Barnet
Dr Peter Rookes, Birmingham	Ambrose Omoma, LB Southwark
Mahmooda Qureshi, Birmingham	Aklima Begum, GLA
Steve Botham, Birmingham	Trevor Howard, CiC International
Dr Stephen Vickers, Birmingham	Jessica Hazrati, Faith and Belief Forum
Chris Kell, Hertfordshire	Prof Chris Baker, Goldsmiths
Charulata Joshi, Hertfordshire	Sanjeev Kumar – individual
Reynold Rosenburg, Hertfordshire	Ronnie Bindra – individual
Deepak Naik, Coventry	Louise Landman - individual
Canon Hilary Barber, Calderwell	Daniel Singleton, FaithAction
Rifaaqat Ali, Bradford	Jeremy Simmons, FaithAction
Geoff Turnbull, Leeds	Andrew Welsby, FaithAction
Marek Lubelski, Luton	Jenny Hadgraft, FaithAction
Andrew Lowing, Essex	
Jane Cox, Cornwall	

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

- Thanked people for joining the session
- The pandemic has paved the way for closer collaborations between faith groups and local authorities
- The Keeping the Faith Report showed how important links were made, and he is looking forward to the follow up report.

Keeping the Faith Follow Up Report

Professor Chris Baker, Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies, Goldsmiths University

Keeping the Faith Recap: The report documented partnerships between local authorities and faith groups during the pandemic. It was a qualitative and quantitative report, with 55 interviews held. Participants showed a real commitment to build on the work of the first six months. It showed a high reliance on faith groups for services such as food banks.

Keeping the Faith 2.0: Embedding a new normal in partnership

- The upcoming report covers the second and third lockdown and uses a different methodology – in depth interviews with 35 participants across England, with two thirds of these being faith-based organisations.
- Many of those interviewed are in leadership roles and interfaith or multi faith forums. Local authority interviewees were in roles at a senior level with responsibility for engaging with religion or belief.
- The report contains responses from most of the faith traditions across England.
- Areas of discussion include the nature of partnership, reflecting on who brings what to the table, reflecting the extent to which Covid changed the nature of partnership and how, describing hallmarks of good working partnership and describing where these hallmarks are absent, and areas of current tension.

- The main issues involved in partnership working include mental health and wellbeing, the rise in domestic abuse and refugee and asylum support. Other areas increased but with less regularity; response to climate issues, knife crime, spikes in hate crime and an increased capacity for emergency fostering services.
- Certain aspects are essential to the development and sustainability of good partnerships, including developing trust, cultivating transparency, embracing new mindsets, commitment to talking honestly about conflict, regular communication, data backed solutions, developing shared goals and celebrating achievements.
- There is a reminder to be attuned to new lexicon arising from the pandemic, addressing local and national policy but with a human-to-human empathy and desire for transformation

Q&A

Q: Social prescribing has not been mentioned – there is a great potential for faith groups to be involved with this.

A: Faith groups have become a conduit for public health and how it is delivered. Faith groups have great potential to be involved in other areas of the health service, for example sexual health. A new Covenant can build on this work and look at the opportunities that faith brings for people, allowing them to be more enmeshed in clinical areas.

Q: The Covenant should increase the quality of relationship with local authorities, but also the quality of relationships with faith groups. We need to promote more understanding between different faith communities and create less opportunity for competition.

A: There is some criticism from respondents around the traditional model of inter faith – one respondent described it as a pillar model and that inter faith needs to be more organic. The report taps into the importance of values and understanding why we are motivated to do what we do, and this model may work for inter faith.

Q: How can smaller faiths ensure they are heard?

A: The report mentions inequalities between faith groups, especially the smaller groups – they feel vulnerable and unheard. Faith groups need to find a more balanced way to create spaces where people can feel able to contribute and be heard. Some of the complaints seem to be based around some of the more formal inter faith approach, rather than being problem driven.

Q: You mentioned a new paradigm outlined about funding – does that mean reduced local authority control?

A: Some local authorities recognise the challenge to recognise the integrity of faith-based organisations. The main point is that everyone is facing deficit models of funding, and we need to ensure it is used correctly. It's an issue to be discussed by more than budget holders, the community should be consulted on what matters most.

Overview of Faith Covenant starter toolkit

Jeremy Simmons, Policy and Programmes Officer, FaithAction

The toolkit is currently being developed and is aimed at areas that don't know quite where to start to begin to navigate setting up a Faith Covenant.

The toolkit aims to distil the core principles and first steps and has been gleaned from conversations over the years – such as what works well, and common challenges encountered.

So far, the toolkit contains the following suggestions for first steps:

- Develop a steering group early on to work on the wording and aims of the Covenant.
- Identify at least one champion on each side for both faith and local authority – successful Covenants are put in place when individuals are passionate about championing it on both sides.
- Explore different structures – lots of Covenants have different ways of working and different demographics in their areas, so find a framework that works well.
- Be practical - what needs can the Covenant fill, could it achieve?
- Consider a launch event – not essential, but a high-profile event is way to exercise the symbolic presence of the Covenant and galvanise different parties involved .

Questions & Comments

Comment: Calderdale have had a Covenant for some time, for good partnership working we have three elected members assigned to work with our inter faith group to oversee the Covenant relationship each year – it ensures that there is monthly dialogue and establishes a good model of working.

Comment: Brent resigned Covenant last year. It important for the forum to clarify what they want out of a Covenant before approaching the council. In Brent we have sometimes found that the council has agenda of what they want from faith groups but it's important for faith groups to set the agenda. Resigning the Covenant has fortified the relationship further and our local authority was very receptive.

Comment: Cornwall doesn't have a Covenant as yet but intalks with the local authority, faith forum and Churches Together. It would be good if the toolkit had a pre first steps part, to hear why an area have a faith covenant and to important to establish a vision, and to encourage this within the toolkit would be useful.

Comment: Early steps should include peer support – as one of the first authorities to sign there wasn't much peer support . For others, it would be useful to hear about the pitfalls etc early on.

Comment: Preston are in the process of reviewing Covenant, it is really good to hear about development of different models, how can FaithAction support in enhancing and developing the Covenant with different models post Covid-19 – how can we be informed of them?

Jeremy thanked participants for feedback and comments and will share the finalised toolkit soon.

Daniel Singleton, National Executive Director, FaithAction

- FaithAction is happy to consult and work with both parties on developing the Faith Covenant. There are always opportunities to chat with individuals outside of this meeting.
- There are conversations about the Faith Covenant happening more widely, such as with NHS England and housing associations.
- The newly formed ICS areas will also give further opportunities.

Expanding Covenants from local areas to Combined Authority areas: Panel discussion

Geoff Turnbull, Equality, Communities, Housing and Environment, Leeds City Council

- Leeds is renewing and refreshing their Covenant, first signed in 2015 with Leeds Faith Forum.
- Stronger relationships have been built during the pandemic and this will feed into the Covenant.
- The refreshed Covenant will set things out more formally and they will tell people about what the Covenant has achieved and promote this widely.
- Leeds has other Covenant areas near by and are considering what a joint authority Faith Covenant would look like, but discussions are at an early stage.

Amrick Singh, Director of Nishkam Centre, Birmingham

- Birmingham is refreshing the Covenant.
- There is no one size fits all approach, all areas have different nuances, and forming a Covenant needs to be flexible.
- In the case of a combined authority approach, a faith group from each area should be present for input.
- If there is already a small relationship between faith and local authorities, grow this relationship and add to it rather than recreate it. Transparency and trust are essential for success.
- A successful Covenant will see faith groups being involved in process such as tenders at an early stage or involved in recruitment process of high-level roles such as directors of health services.
- The Covenant has made a big difference in engaging with faith groups in many areas such as domestic abuse work and hate crime. They also work with faith leaders on areas such as housing strategies – ensuring the voice of faith is heard.

Dr Peter Rookes, Coordinator of BCF: Faiths Promoting Health and Wellbeing, Birmingham

- The possibility of including ICS's and other statutory services such as police can be considered if expanding existing Covenants,
- Birmingham is mapping all 800 of the places of worship -a big project to map how faith can interact with social prescribing schemes.
- The shift into the health is promising and an exciting change – many faith groups are getting involved in health needs and provisions.
- The Covenant provides a structure – but to work it needs good relationships, regular meetings and lots of spin offs, developing other networks.