

APPG Faith Covenant Forum Wednesday 14th May 2025

Attendees

Nicholas Chwiej, Wolverhampton

Stephen Vickers, Birmingham

Vanessa Gayton, Essex

Jacquetta Gomes, Westmoreland and Furness

Robert Brown, Brighton and Hove

Tim Jones, Brighton and Hove

Cllr Oliver Edwards, Leeds

Charulata Joshi, Hertfordshire

Peter Rookes, Birmingham

Stuart Diamond, Brighton and Hove

Iruka Edeh, Cornwall

Sail Suleman, Calderdale

Shammi Jalota, Essex

Andrew Lowing, Essex

Reynold Rosenberg, Hertfordshire

Haroon Ravat, Solihull

Timothy Tofts, Southampton

Cllr John Spence, Essex

Valerie Skottowe, Welwyn Hatfield

Jamie Hooper, Westmorland and Furness

Andrew Yates, Cornwall

Zöe Franklin MP, APPG on Faith and Society

Andrew Welsby, FaithAction

Jeremy Simmons, FaithAction

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

Jenny Hadgraft, FaithAction

Minutes:

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

- Welcomed attendees
- Brief updates on FaithAction programmes and upcoming plans.
- Encouragement for engagement with FaithAction's weekly e-newsletter.

Introduction to Zöe Franklin MP, new Chair of APPG on Faith and Society

Zöe Franklin MP, Chair of APPG

- MP for Guildford since July; long-standing interest in faith and civil society.
- Practicing Christian; political career influenced by faith.
- Experience includes Guildford Borough Council and charity work.

- Sees the APPG as an opportunity to champion faith-civil society collaboration.
- Main interests include creative industries and refugee issues, aligning with her role on the Department of Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.
- Surrey, her constituency, is part of the first wave of local government reorganisation due to severe financial issues.
- Spoke about learning about the Faith Covenant through a Westminster event and was inspired by its reach and impact.
- Stressed the importance of fostering strong local relationships between faith groups and councils.
- Noted the inconsistency in these relationships and highlighted the Covenant's potential to standardise positive engagement.

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

Daniel highlighted upcoming work areas for the APPG:

1. **Youth strategy** – ongoing interest from previous projects.
2. **Maternity outcomes** – continuing work, particularly linked with faith groups.
3. **Faith in care and DWP services** – boosted by former chair's role at the DWP.
4. **Sustained Faith Covenant promotion** – the cornerstone of APPG's work.

Local Government Reorganisation

Andrew Welsby, FaithAction

Andrew gave background to the upcoming reorganisation to local government

- The government published the English Devolution White Paper in December 2024
- Aim: Decentralise power from Westminster to local authorities.
- Expands the number of combined authorities and elected local mayors.
- Grants local authorities more power and responsibilities.
- Government encouraging the 21 remaining two-tier authorities to become unitary authorities.
- All services to be managed under a single authority per area.
- Areas have flexibility in shaping the new structure.
- Six areas fast-tracked:
 - **Cumbria**
 - **Cheshire and Warrington**
 - **Norfolk and Suffolk**
 - **Greater Essex**

- **Sussex**
- **Hampshire and Solent**
- These areas will have new mayors and statutory combined authorities by next year.
- These changes could have implications to Faith Covenant areas, and there is a risk that reorganisation could dissolve or marginalize existing faith engagement structures.
- Example: Essex – both county and 11 of 12 district councils are Faith Covenant members. A change could reduce the number of active covenant authorities.
- Concerns:
 - How to maintain influence and continuity during structural change.
 - How to help new authorities adopt and integrate the Covenant.

Discussion

Zöe Franklin MP, Chair of APPG

- Reorganisation is also an opportunity to encourage non-participating areas to adopt the Covenant.
- Should engagement begin now (to plant the seed) or wait until reorganisation is complete—or both?

Sail Suleman, Calderdale

- Confident that local structure is robust and mature enough not to be negatively impacted by the upcoming changes.

Andrew Lowing, Essex

- Faith Covenant has been in place in Essex since 2017. This includes Essex County Council and 11 of 12 districts as signatories, plus police, fire, and health services.
- Maintaining cohesion and momentum across 12 districts is difficult.
- Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) may allow for more localised covenant structures, possibly enhancing engagement.
- The council have been hosting webinars to inform and involve voluntary and faith-based organisations in the LGR and devolution processes.

Vanessa Gayton, Essex

- Represents Epping Forest District Council on the Essex Faith Covenant.
- Likely to be involved in LGR consultation once it begins.
- Feels optimistic but cautious. Awaiting clarity on future unitary structure before taking definitive actions, but sees potential for positive outcomes through strong existing collaboration.

Reynold Rosenberg, Hertfordshire

- Dual-Level Engagement within Hertfordshire. Covenant has been signed at both county (Hertfordshire) and local (Welwyn Hatfield) levels.
- He has concerns over mixed signals:
 - Noted that there is a contradiction. LGR pushes toward both larger authorities and more localized engagement.
 - Engagement efforts are being deprioritized by councils preoccupied with structural uncertainty.
- Without clarity or immediate action, faith-council dialogue risks stagnation

Jamie Hooper, Westmorland and Furness

- Westmorland and Furness are further along in their reorganisation journey. They have now reached two Years as Unitary Authority and are still building post-restructure infrastructure.
- They are very early in their Covenant Work. Recently initiated discussions; held kickoff meetings including FaithAction and Cornwall representatives who have a similarly rural structure.
- Have commissioned Faith and Social Action Mapping to understand and identify faith-based contributions.
- They are looking to honour the autonomy of faith communities while fostering productive council partnerships.
- Being rural creates challenges. Small, dispersed populations mean overlapping responsibilities among a limited group of community leaders.
- Faith engagement seen as a key avenue to implement the principle of Community Power.

Andrew Yates, Cornwall

- Cornwall is a recent signatory of a Faith Covenant, having done so in November, and since taken on the challenges from FaithAction for implementation.
- There have been a number of outcomes from their commitment to a Faith Covenant:
 - Faith Literacy Program: Developed lunch-and-learn sessions for Cornwall Council staff to better understand different faiths.
 - Social Action Mapping: Ongoing effort to catalogue faith-based community service across the county.
- Partnership between the Council and Cornwall Faith Forum appears to be productive and inspiring to others.

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

- Emphasised mapping as a critical tool to help identify faith stakeholders in changing governance landscapes.

- Raised the issue of co-determinates with NHS structures — a "silver bullet" for efficient coordination — though none have confirmed such alignment yet.
- Potential need to re-sign or redefine Faith Covenants as new authorities form or merge.
- Many regions (e.g. Essex) expressed the view that it's still too early for definitive action but are preparing for adaptive conversations.

Stephen Vickers, Birmingham

- High uncertainty about how re-organisation will work where he lives in Oxfordshire and there are unclear reorganisation plans (e.g., "doughnut model" vs. north-south split).
- Lack of clarity delays decisions on Covenant reconfiguration.

Other Updates

Andrew Lowing, Essex

- Shared the value of rotating secretariat roles among signatories to diversify leadership and perspectives.

Vanessa Gayton, Essex

- Is currently working as the secretariat to the Essex Faith Covenant group
- The group is looking at focusing on these areas for this year:
 - Food poverty and security as 2024's theme.
 - Greater networking and engagement, including drawing in new Covenant signatories.
 - Balancing relevant social issues with contributions from public services (e.g., fostering services).

Tim Jones, Brighton and Hove

- Brighton re-signed its Covenant in November.
- Currently navigating potential merger with East and West Sussex amidst leadership flux.
- Active in broader networks (e.g., police and health), supporting interfaith linkage across districts.
- Recommends a "network of networks" strategy rather than centralising leadership in one area due to varied religious profiles.

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

- Cautiously raised the "**Reform effect**" — the idea that rising populist or anti-establishment political currents may impact how faith engagement is received or supported in public life and wondered whether any of the council officers in attendance were facing having their job titles or job roles changed.
- FaithAction remains apolitical but acknowledges sectoral anxieties around political attitudes toward equality, cohesion, and integration roles.

Peter Rookes, Birmingham

- Birmingham has been celebrating their 10-year Covenant milestone, with the Covenant now expanded beyond council to include NHS, police, and CPS.
- Embedded in broader VCFSE (Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise) alliance — promotes shared civic engagement.
- Highlighted Bursting the Bubble report from the Faith and Belief Forum. The report:
 - Reinforces value of Interfaith Week and broader interfaith efforts.
 - Calls for faith groups to engage more fully with civil society, not just with each other.
 - Recognizes that many participating Covenant groups are already embodying this approach, suggesting that more outreach is needed to non-participating regions.

Sail Suleman, Calderdale

- Interfaith Council in Calderdale remains robust, with regular engagement from elected officials, including the Mayor.
- They've been able to foster active engagement. Regular faith leaders' meetings have been held in response to global events (e.g., Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan).
- Interfaith efforts rely increasingly on limited local authority funding and voluntary goodwill.
- Faith Council's consistent collaboration with local government serves as a strong example of faith in action.

Andrew Yates, Cornwall

- Reform Party now holds the most council seats in Cornwall, followed by Lib Dems, with 16 independents.
- There's no Governance Majority Yet. Political alliances still in flux; concern over how this will affect faith engagement and committee representation.

Valerie Skottowe, Welwyn Hatfield

- For the first time in years, a Remembrance Day event featuring diverse faiths was publicly criticized by a Reform Party-affiliated individual. She felt this reflects a broader societal challenge in maintaining inclusive, pluralistic civic practices.

Cllr Oliver Edwards, Leeds

- First Reform Councillor Recently Elected but their impact is yet to be seen.
- He noted that while initiatives like Holocaust Memorial Day are widely supported, other aspects of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), especially involving certain faith groups, face political resistance.
- He identified a risk of fragmentation. He emphasised the need to resist selective engagement and uphold a comprehensive, inclusive EDI and faith strategy.

Daniel Singleton, FaithAction

- He encouraged Cllr Edwards and colleagues from West Yorkshire to speak with colleagues in Bradford and help them on a journey to a Faith Covenant. FaithAction has engaged previously with the council and has worked extensively in the area around English language and health literacy, which provides a foundation for future covenant work.

Close of meeting

Jeremy Simmons from FaithAction closed the meeting, and thanked attendees for joining. He encouraged participants to keep FaithAction updated with developments around local government reorganisation and other Covenant related developments. He also highlight Faith in Partnership Week, an upcoming national event like to include Covenant related activity. Attendees were invited to mark their calendars and consider contributing.