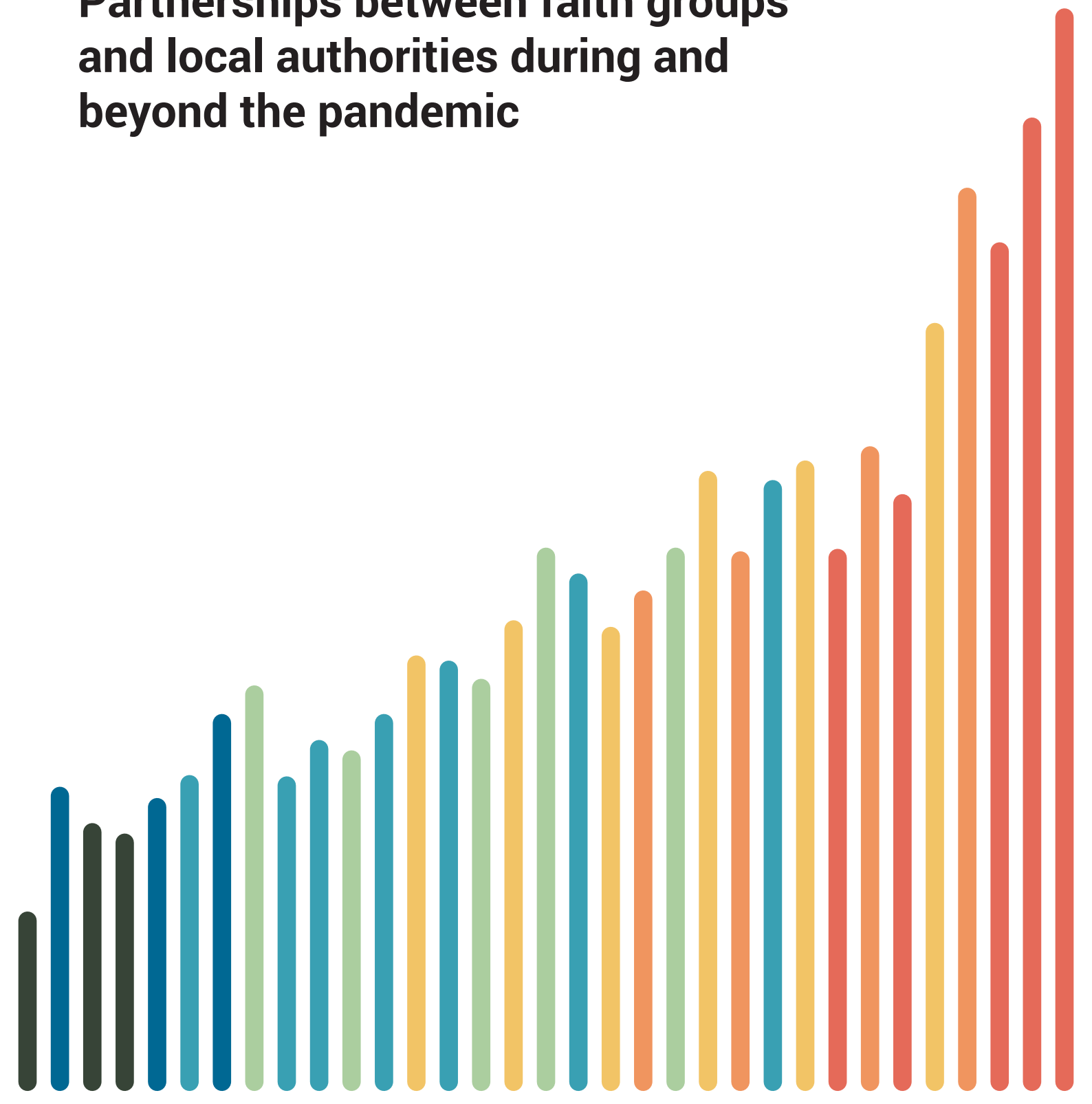
all-party parliamentary group
appg faith and society

Keeping the Faith

Partnerships between faith groups and local authorities during and beyond the pandemic



Foreword

Collaboration between local authorities and faith groups has dramatically increased in the pandemic. The imperative of providing support to vulnerable families has overcome decades of wariness.

Of local authorities responding to the survey on which this report is based, undertaken by Goldsmiths, University of London, over the summer of 2020, 59% had been working with church-based food banks. 24% had been working with mosque-based food banks, 11% with food banks based in Sikh Gurdwaras and 10% with food banks based in Hindu temples. Larger proportions still had been working with faith groups to collect food or financial donations, to cook and deliver meals, recruit volunteers for council programmes and share information to members. For example, 23% of councils said they had worked with Jewish groups, and 18% had worked with Buddhist groups, to share information with members.

Equally striking as these numbers is the very positive feedback gathered from both councils and faith groups of their experience of this collaboration. One council lead told the researcher: *'My personal admiration for faith groups has gone through the roof, just in terms of their commitment there. We as a local authority didn't know what we were getting into. And they have got involved with smiles on their faces and they've done it professionally.'* Most of those responding expected collaboration to be maintained or developed further in the future.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Faith and Society was established in 2012 to promote the engagement of faith groups and faith-based organisations in supporting their communities. In 2014, we published our Faith Covenant, comprising a set of ground rules for collaboration between faith groups and local authorities, intended to build mutual understanding between them and enable collaboration avoiding potential pitfalls. Danny Kruger MP, in his recent report to the Prime Minister on *"Levelling Up Our Communities"*, has suggested that the Faith Covenant might provide the basis for a new deal between the Government and faith groups.

Public policy has often implicitly assumed that religious faith is on the way out. That view has been harder to maintain over the last decade or so, but religious faith has still often been seen as irrelevant, or possibly harmful, to community wellbeing. This fascinating report underlines that, in Britain in 2020, faith groups have vital resources which are crucial for community wellbeing, and which cannot be found anywhere else. We need our institutions to be able to work respectfully with people whose starting point is religious faith and to tap into the moral perspectives, and the experience of running practical initiatives, which faith communities offer. All of us in Parliament need to take heed, and to work out the implications for public policy.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP

Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

Executive summary

We report here on research which has been undertaken across the UK to explore the changing contours of partnership between local authorities and faith groups and faith-based organisations in the context of responses to COVID-19. The research examines the types and amount of joint activity that has emerged since the pandemic began. It also identifies how new experiences of collaboration and partnership point towards changing relationships and mutual perceptions between local authorities and faith communities, and what the implications might be for future policy.

Methods

A bespoke survey was sent to all 408 local authorities in the UK and 55 in-depth interviews were conducted with local authority leaders and co-ordinators of faith-based projects across 10 sample local authorities. The research was carried out by the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London, in partnership with the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society. It was conducted over July and August 2020 and 194 local authorities submitted valid returns (a response rate of 47.5%).

These robust levels of return across the UK provide strong evidence of four significant aspects of the relationships between local authorities and faith-based providers:

1. The pandemic has given rise to a significant increase in the numbers and depth of relations between local authorities and faith communities. The often hidden or unnoticed contributions that faith groups make to the resilience of local communities have become much more visible. Local authorities say they have discovered a new appreciation of the agility, flexibility and professionalism of faith groups and faith-based organisations in their responses to the pandemic;
2. Faith groups and faith-based organisations are integral to the immediate civil society response to the pandemic. Local authorities regard them as integral and essential to the COVID-19 response, in their deployment of buildings, food banks, networks, information sharing, befriending, collecting, cooking and delivering food, and providing volunteers for local authority programmes;
3. Local authorities report their experiences of working in partnership with faith groups as overwhelmingly positive; and
4. Almost every local authority in the study endorses a commitment to build on this and to deepen relationships supporting long-term policy interventions and partnerships in ways that are different to the current practice and norms.

Headlines

- 60% of local authorities who participated in this research involved food banks operated by a faith group or faith-based organisation as part of their response to the pandemic;
- 67% of local authorities report that there has been an increase in partnership working with faith groups since the start of the pandemic;
- Partnership has grown most since the start of the pandemic in relation to food poverty (up from 66% of local authorities before COVID-19 to 78% now) and mental health and wellbeing (up from 43% to 48% now);
- 91% of local authorities describe their experience of partnership with faith groups as 'Very Positive' or 'Positive';
- 93% of local authorities in our survey consider wider sharing of best practice in co-production between faith groups and local authorities to be 'Very Important' or 'Important';
- The most diverse local authority areas are also the most likely to see their faith communities as open and inclusive, rather than closed and conditional;
- 76% of local authorities expect that new partnerships undertaken with faith groups during the pandemic will continue afterwards. 47% of them want these partnerships to continue on a changed basis after the pandemic;
- Future priorities are focused on deeper co-production of goods and services, rooted in named shared values and a shift from 'authority' to 'enabler'; and
- Faith groups are pioneering inclusive digitally based outreach to communities that could help local authorities address wider issues of inclusion, participation and belonging for the most isolated, vulnerable and socially marginalised;

The report concludes that the pandemic has both significantly increased local authority partnerships with faith groups and opened up a 'new normal' in the relationships between them: a civic and policy space characterised by relationships of trust, collaboration and innovation in which local authorities function more as enablers towards faith communities, rather than commissioners, funders or regulators. There are of course dissenting views. However, the fact that many councils expect these new numbers and modes of partnership to continue beyond the pandemic highlights the need to understand what the opportunities, challenges and implications of such a shift would be.

Recommendations

The report recommends appointing a **Faiths Commissioner** to promote and champion faith groups' collaborations with local authorities. The Faiths Commissioner's status would be similar to that of the Children's Commissioner for England. The Office of the Faiths Commissioner would be a non-departmental body, but appointed by a Government department, such as the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government. This appointment could underpin the development of four further initiatives to strengthen relationships between local authorities and faith groups:

1) Encourage the nationwide widespread adoption of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society's Faith Covenant;
2) A toolkit – drawing on the Faith Covenant – should be developed by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society and distributed to each local authority in the UK; and
3) Establish a new "Faiths Advisory Council" for liaison between faith groups and central Government to look strategically at ways for faith groups to contribute to improvements in a post-COVID-19 Britain.

Introduction

The research was commissioned by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society, and conducted by the Faiths and Civil Society Unit (FCSU) based in the Department of Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London.

The purpose of this report is to provide a comprehensive analysis of how local authorities and faith groups and faith-based organisations have been working in partnership in the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The impetus for this research was the general perception that faith groups were amongst the 'first responders', putting into practice well-established networks and procedures that in some cases had been honed during the past decade of austerity and which have focussed primarily on the distribution and provision of emergency food and other support to those living in poverty. This activity was the therefore a key focus of this research. Some faith groups and faith-based initiatives[1] received calls from local authorities within the first few days of the first national lockdown announced on 23rd March 2020 to step in with emergency provision and co-ordination of vital food supplies to vulnerable groups facing lockdown, self-isolation or economic precarity. Others simply responded by activating their own networks to step up very local responses, which were subsequently noticed by their local authorities and incorporated into more strategic forms of delivery.

This research analyses the first six months of that experience, both in terms of the range and intensity of the provision, but also what this might mean for relationships between local authorities and faith communities in the future. This analysis is also timely, coming as it does on the heels of the publication of the *Levelling Up Our Communities* report written in 2020 by Danny Kruger MP for the Conservative government, on possible future trajectories of civil society. In it, the contribution and resources of faith groups, highlighted by the experience of the pandemic, are a central pillar of a proposed future government strategy for the post-COVID-19 reconstruction of civil society.[2] It proposes what it calls a 'New Deal with Faith Communities', which envisages an invitation to the country's faith leaders to 'make a grand offer of help on behalf of their communities, in exchange for a reciprocal commitment from the state' (p.35) to tackle a major social policy area – for example, children in care, prisoner rehabilitation or homelessness. Our research highlights some of the trends set out in Kruger's report, but also offers some alternative views of the role and impact of faith groups in a post COVID-19 policy landscape.

1 This report will predominantly use the term 'faith groups' as a general concept to indicate the response of the faith sector as a whole. The term 'faith-based organisations ' will also be occasionally used to represent the diversity of this field, and include those organisations and networks that are run as separate entities to the worshipping institution that sponsor them, or are organisations strongly imbued with religious values but do not exhibit an explicit religious identity.

2 Levelling Up Our Communities; proposals for a new social covenant (Sept 2020) https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/communities-report Retrieved October 3rd, 2020.

1 Context

At the time of reporting in November 2020, the United Kingdom finds itself on the edge of a second wave of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This follows the devastating and disorientating impacts of the initial outbreak which peaked in spring 2020, and which has to date resulted in the deaths of nearly 42,000 people.[3] The data collected for this research was gathered in July and August of 2020, just as the most severe impacts of the first wave of the pandemic were beginning to subside. During these months, the health impacts of the first wave were beginning to be assessed. Particularly marked were the high loss of life, race and class-based disparity of effects, and the collateral effects on mental health as well as knock-on effects on other serious illnesses (such as cancer and heart disease). The economic and social costs of the national lockdown were also beginning to emerge. The Government's furlough scheme and other measures designed to mitigate the immediate impact of the lockdown on employment are beginning to come to an end and the unemployment rate was beginning to rise steeply.

The severe challenges generated by concurrent health and economic crises have placed a heavy burden not only on healthcare, business and manufacturing sectors, but also on local authorities and the local structures of civil society, including charities, faith groups and other intermediate groups such as neighbourhood groups and sports clubs. Much of the capacity of these sectors had already been substantially reduced during a decade of austerity that emerged as a policy response to the debt crisis created by the global financial crash of 2008. The policy featured an average reduction of nearly 50% to the overall budgets of local authorities that substantially reduced statutory funding for local voluntary sector organisations during this period.[4] Some extra support for this sector has been provided by central and devolved administrations to deal with the local and regional impacts of the crisis, but the strain on budgets left by austerity remains apparent.[5]

3 This was the official UK Government figure for September 28th 2020. https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/

4 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/2036/203605.htm Retrieved October 19th, 2020.

5 For example, £1.6 billion was earmarked for local authorities across the UK to deal with the immediate impact of COVID-19. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-pledges-extra-16-billion-for-councils Retrieved September 28th 2020.

Most local responses to the pandemic have had to be scrambled with instant effect, requiring local authorities and their partners to improvise short-term crisis support to those most vulnerable and at immediate risk from self-isolation. These include the elderly and housebound, the homeless, those already experiencing high levels of anxiety and loneliness, children and those at risk of abuse as well as the large numbers living in poverty, whose access to their low-wage and often insecure work has been made even more precarious by places of work having to close. This has meant quickly devising new forms of communication and partnership, and building on existing structures, protocols and relationships in innovative and flexible ways.

This research focuses on the role of faith groups and faith-based organisations – one key part of this ongoing experience of localised innovation, collaboration, and improvisation in the face of unforeseen and unprecedented demands on our human, social and economic structures and ways of living. It focuses specifically on how these dynamics have played out so far between local authorities and councils, and the faith groups and faith-based organisations that are embedded within their boundaries. It explores not only the *extent of any change* in the nature and scope of activity between local authorities and faith groups. It also records some of the *relational shifts* that have arisen out of the shared experience of dealing with the effects of the pandemic and its immediate aftermath.

2
The Aims of the Research

The aims of this research were to:

- Quantify the extent of new relationships between local authorities and churches, other faith groups, and faith-based organisations since the start of the coronavirus pandemic;
- Understand changes to existing relationships and how local authorities have been working since the pandemic, with churches, church-based organisations and other faith groups;
- Examine the nature and purpose of these relationships;
- Explore how and why these relationships/ collaborations have come about;
- Investigate how the relationships have worked in practice and what long term expectations are after the pandemic has passed; and
- Review the immediate, medium and long-term implications of these relationships for local authorities, for communities and for churches/ faith groups.

As well as measuring the *quantity* of this activity, the research also investigates the *quality* of this experience. Has increased activity also led to change in the relationships between local authorities and faith groups? Or has the crisis simply consolidated existing ways of working and understandings?

Previous reports have often tended to frame the relationship between local authorities and faith groups as a potential clash of secular versus religious worldviews, which has often led to misconceptions and suspicions on both sides (as critiqued in Dinham, Furbey and Lowndes, 2009). Has the pandemic created the conditions and impetus for a 'new normal' in the way that local authorities now regard their working relationship with faith groups, and vice versa? Will this new normal be the basis for future planning and relationships in a post-COVID-19 landscape, or will aspects of the 'old normal' return once the immediate crises have passed?

3

The recent policy landscape regarding faith communities

The last 20 years have seen a steady increase in the volume of reports and research in this field in both policy and academic frameworks, reflecting a growing interest and indeed preoccupation, with the role and impact of religion and belief on public life. This interest reflects both macro geo-political and social trends, as well as the impact of religion and belief at the level of community and individual lives.

Early landmark documents in the UK, written at the start of the current millennium and in the shadow of 9/11 and race riots in some Northern English cities, help reset the agenda around religion for a secular policy audience. A report entitled *Faiths, Hope and Participation* (NEF/CUF, 2001) identified what has since become an established set of recognisable goods that faith groups bring to the policy table. These include a sense of vision and the wider picture – what the report calls a 'holistic view of renewal' which sees through the 'symptoms' to 'the root causes' of inequality and exclusion. Faith groups bring a strong sense of motivation to be a difference in their community, rooted in the values, beliefs, worldviews and practices of their faith traditions, which is sometimes referred to as 'spiritual capital' (Baker and Skinner, 2007) or 'faithful capital' (CULF, 2006). These often intangible goods (holistic vision, spiritual capital) nevertheless generate a host of physical goods and services including a strong and embedded sense of presence in local communities in the form of *'local infrastructure'* which include buildings and networks of volunteers and paid staff by which faith groups are able to 'organise, finance and resource their vision' (NEF /CUF 2001, 10).

However, a counter narrative about the potential pitfalls associated with an uncritical partnership with faith groups also emerged at this time. *'Faith' in Urban Regeneration?* (Farnell et.al. 2003), specifically highlighted that 'positive examples of religion as a force for social justice and community service' must be balanced by a recognition of religion 'as a source of conflict, division or oppression'. These divisive elements were identified as;

- An institutional bias towards Christianity over other faith groups;
- Intra-faith sectarianism'
- A lack of accountability and structure to handle public funds;
- Hierarchical and patriarchal structures that inhibit or silence the voices of women and young people;
- Unwillingness to comply with legislation;
- An inherent clash with the expectation from statutory bodies that faith groups should separate the secular from the sacred (i.e. not bring confessional views or perspectives into planning or funding applications);
- An anxiety about proselytization; and
- Homophobic views and social conservatism.

Good vs Bad Religion

Whilst these early reports contained a largely balanced view of faith communities, the newness of the debate and the need to respond quickly to the threat of religiously-based global terrorism emerging at the time helped cement these tropes into very binary forms of analysis for policy audiences. Religion was either good – acting as a force for social cohesion and harmony in useful partnership with the state. Or it was bad – a force for reactionary violence and radicalisation. It has been suggested that this view of good vs. bad religion has been amplified by the Prevent strategy, introduced by the New Labour government in 2006. It was designed to actively prevent people becoming radicalised by extreme ideologies. However, due to the global rise of Islamic State and its subsequent global recruitment, alongside strategies of surveillance and suspect control, Prevent was quickly perceived as anti-Islamic and made people in many Muslim communities in the UK feel fearful and estranged from British culture (Awan, 2012; O'Toole, DeHanas and Modood, 2012).

However, these reports pointed out that these unrealistic projections of either very good or very bad religion were often compounded by an ignorance on the part of policy and local authority actors, fuelled by a subconsciously secular mindset which broadly assumed public space to be spiritually and philosophically 'neutral' and faith groups and the public role of religion to be either invisible or inconsequential. The call for religious literacy training for local authorities and other public bodies was heard increasingly loudly. In the early days, religious literacy focussed on communicating an 'official' version associated with religious practices, i.e. official doctrines and codified beliefs, customs and food prohibitions, places of worship etc. However, it became clear that this approach does little to move away from this static and binary view of good vs bad religion – in fact in many ways it reinforces it.

As Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis have more recently argued, religious literacy needs to move beyond a simplified view of 'official' faith into an approach that focuses on understanding religion and belief as it is actually lived out and practised in everyday life at the local level. This approach emphasises religion, belief and spirituality (including non-religious worldviews) as widespread aspects of life and identity that inevitably plays out in the way that individuals behave and communities form. As Dinham and Francis argue, 'Religious literacy doesn't stop at being ready and willing to have the conversation. It needs to go into the conversation itself. In this sense, religious literacy engages in the depths of religions and beliefs, as they present in theology, tradition, lived experience and practice. It is about specificity as well as generality' (2015 14). In recent years, academic research and writing has focussed on how faith meets the immediate social needs that emerged after the official introduction to widespread austerity measures from 2010, as a response to the global financial crisis of 2008. Attention has focussed on the role of faith groups in tackling poverty, to the point whereby the emblem or image of the food bank has become largely synonymous with faith-based engagement. This experience has created an internal shift within faith groups themselves as they attempt to walk a fine line between meeting the large increases of those who need access to food banks,[6] and challenging and raising awareness of government policies that have directly led to this increase in the need for food bank use (Cloke, May and Williams, 2017).

6 The Trussell Trust reported an increase of 81% in demand for food parcels during March 2020 and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) declared a 59% for the same period https://www.itv.com/news/2020-05-01/huge-increase-in-food-bank-use-in-recent-weeks-charities-report Retrieved October 3rd 2020

Since COVID-19, austerity measures have been reversed, and the current government has embarked on an unprecedented programme of massive state intervention aimed primarily at furloughing jobs and providing retraining for those about to become unemployed.[7]

This research therefore comes at a turning point within the policy debate on religion and belief. The last 20 years have seen a re-awakening of interest in the public and community role of religion and belief, which includes a growing appreciation and understanding of the significance of religion for key policy areas around community development and urban regeneration, cohesion, diversity and inclusion (Baker, Crisp and Dinham, 2018). The demand for knowledge about what faith brings to the public sphere has also shifted, from a necessary but ultimately surface knowledge about the 'dos' and 'don'ts' around religion, to being included in a wider and more common search for the values and practices that shape our civil society, particularly in the context of a global pandemic and climate emergency.

7 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/rishis-plan-for-jobs-will-help-britain-bounce-back Retrieved October 5th 2020

4
Research Methodology

To carry out this research, the research team devised a 19-item survey that was sent to each of the 408 local authorities and councils across the UK. This quantitative approach to measuring the extent of activity and response was triangulated by 55 in-depth interviews with key participants from both sectors (28 local authority and 27 faith-based) from across 10 local authority areas. Interviewees included elected councillors, council executives and local authority leads engaged in policy areas as diverse as Regeneration, Area Partnerships, Social Responsibility, Community Justice and Homelessness. Faith-based representatives were located in City Missions, local clergy, faith-based cafes, food banks, community charities, Islamic centres and Bangladeshi centres, independent churches, regional and national faith leaders, and ecumenical and interfaith officers. These interviews aimed to get a more localised and descriptive account of the changes to patterns of working and relationships as a result of the pandemic, and their future implications.

The survey was distributed electronically to senior contacts (usually the CEO's office) in all local authority and district councils in the UK. In some cases, extra copies of the survey were sent at the request of personnel who were designated to supply the information. In all, a total of 194 councils out of a potential total of 408 (i.e. 47.5%) returned valid (i.e. fully completed) responses. Some council and authority areas sent in multiple responses, which made the total of valid returned surveys n = 214.[8] In addition to the statistical data generated by the survey, free text comments and reflections were generated which asked respondents to reflect on their experience of working with faith groups during COVID-19.

The other source of data consisted of 55 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders and managers/co-ordinators from both local authorities and/or faith groups or faith-related organisations involved in responding to food poverty, food distribution to those shielding and other types of relief. These were based in 10 local authority areas across the UK. The numbers of interviews were split equally between local authority and faith sector interviewees, and the local authorities were chosen to represent a diversity of contexts (rural, metropolitan, inner urban etc.). All research was carried out between July and August 2020.

Survey Sample

The regional spread, the type of local authority or council and the departmental sources of the information supplied by the 214 respondents from the 194 participating local authorities was as follows:

8 The research team considered that – in order to incorporate all relevant data and avoid bias – all responses should be incorporated into the analysis.

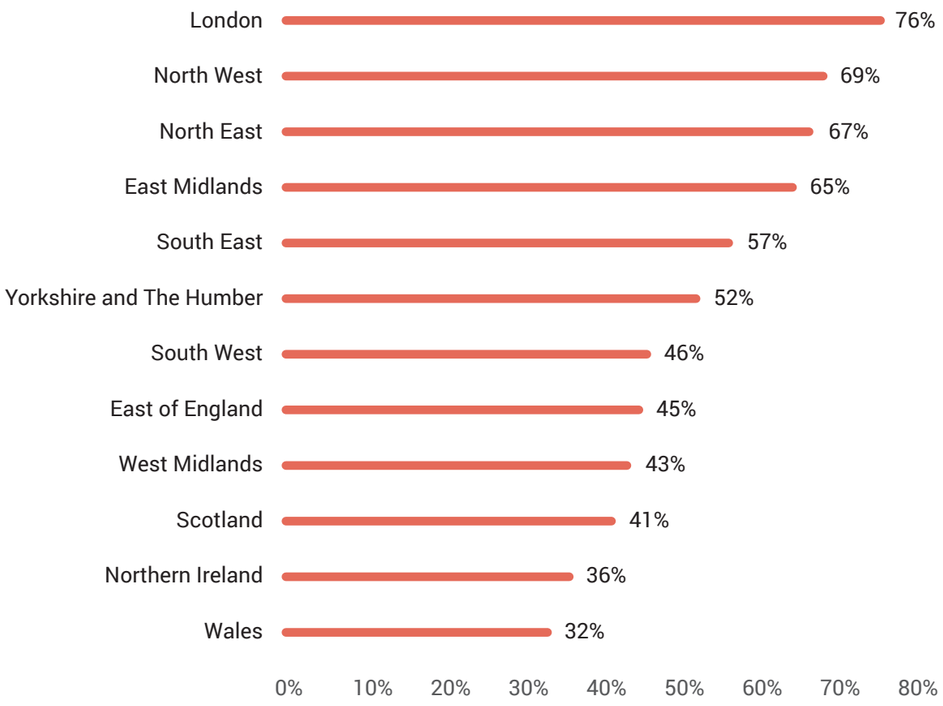
Type of Local Authority

The highest rate of response to the survey were from lower tier (or district) councils at 43%, closely followed by unitary authorities on just under 40%. The lowest rate of response was the upper tier (or County councils) at 11%. This might suggest that data concerning engagement and partnership with faith groups was easier to access and report at smaller-scale authorities than larger ones.

Local Authority by region or nation

There was a strong distribution of response across all regions and nations of the UK, with some regional differences in the proportion of responses received. The three regions in the UK with the highest level of response to the survey were the Greater London region with 76% of all boroughs responding, followed by the North West (69%) and the North East (67%). The three regions with the lowest level of response were from the devolved administrations. The low rates of response from the other nations of the UK may indicate the fact that, in these contexts, much of the responsibility for co-ordinating a response to the pandemic lies at a national assembly level, rather than at local council level.

Percentage response of councils in region or nation



Type of Departmental Response

The survey discovered a large range of departments and job titles within local authorities and district councils that responded with data on religion and faith. The number of categories and the distribution of results is too wide to represent in a meaningful way in graph form.

The range of departments with responsibility for monitoring relations with faith groups, in addition to the Chief Executive's Office include:

- Business Intelligence and Change/Transformation;
- Children's Services;
- City and Neighbourhood Assets;
- Communities (including Neighbourhoods, Community and Partnerships, Engagement, Development, Planning, Resources, Relations, Services etc.);
- Corporate Business (including Business Partnerships, Management, Policy, Resources, Operations);
- Education, Leisure and Housing;
- Environmental Health and Housing;
- Legal and Governance;
- Mayor's Office;
- Participation and Engagement;
- Place and Wellbeing;
- Planning and Economic Development;
- Public Health;
- Voluntary and Community Sector; and
- Workforce and Transformation.

The breadth of this list indicates the wide spread of local authority departments with responsibility for working with faith groups. It raises the question as to whether this cross-cutting across so many different areas of policy makes faith groups a potential asset in the development of a resilient and inclusive post COVID-19 policy landscape. At the same time however, this policy 'intersectionality' could inhibit more constructive and strategic relationships in the future because of the ongoing 'problem' of where to locate faith, religion and belief within local authority structures.

5
Analysis: the survey

Having mapped the spread of responses across type, region and bureaucratic location we now turn to the major findings from the survey. After analysing and coding it, a clear cluster of themes emerged, several of which have been evident in the experience of the last 20 years, but which are now given new clarity and greater nuance by the common challenges presented by the pandemic. These clusters broadly fall into three types of engagement: a commitment to exploring deeper *relationships*, a commitment to sharing *resources* and *innovation*, and a commitment to sharing vision and planning for the future – what we are calling a commitment to the *strategic*. In what follows, most of the data from the survey reflects a commitment to one of these types of engagement – but often across all three. These three headings therefore form a simple but cohesive framework by which to present the data from the survey.

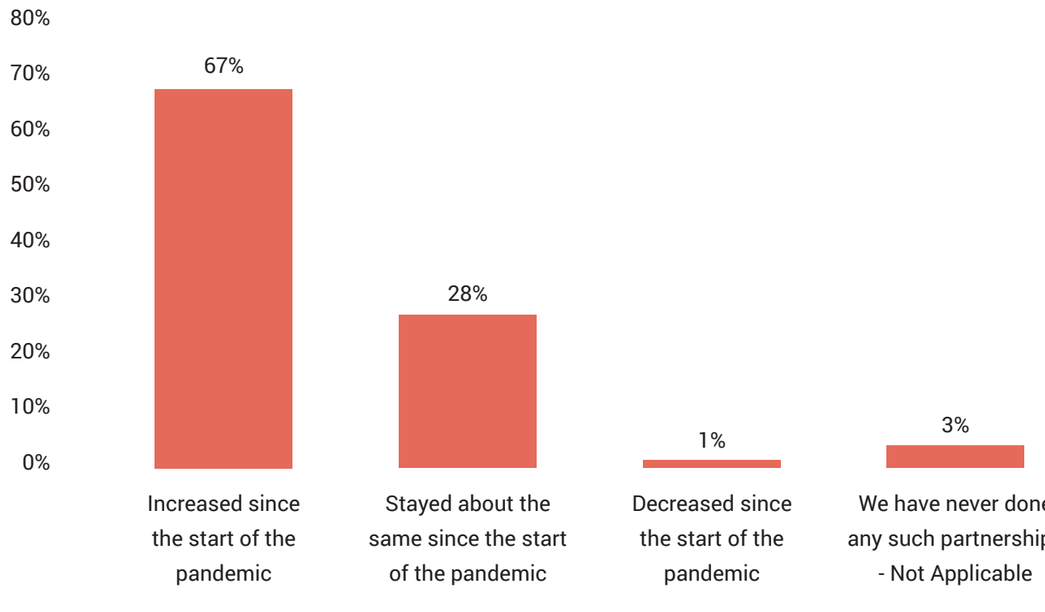
Relationships

This section highlights the evolving relationships between local authorities and faith groups during the current pandemic.

Partnership working between local authorities and faith groups has increased since the pandemic

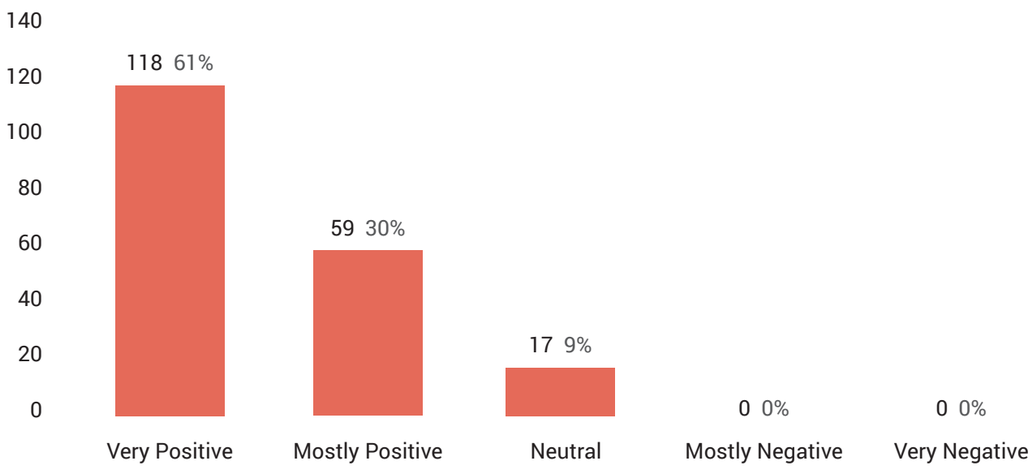
The graph below shows a significant and unambiguous perception across the 194 local authorities that partnership with faith groups has increased since the pandemic. 67% reported an increase compared to less than a third (28%) who thought it had stayed the same. Only three local authorities (i.e. 1%) thought that the levels of partnership had declined. The pandemic has seen a widespread increase in partnership working and collaboration between statutory and religious 'actors', and the rest of the survey attempts to address the features and principles that lie behind this strong increase.

Overall, do you feel that the amount of partnership working between your local authority and faith groups has:



This data highlighting the increase in partnership working is supplemented by data in response to a question asking local authorities to characterise their experience of partnership working by using a Likert scale from 'Very Positive' to 'Very Negative'.

Overall, how would you characterise your experience of partnership working between your local authority and faith groups and faith-based organisations during the pandemic?

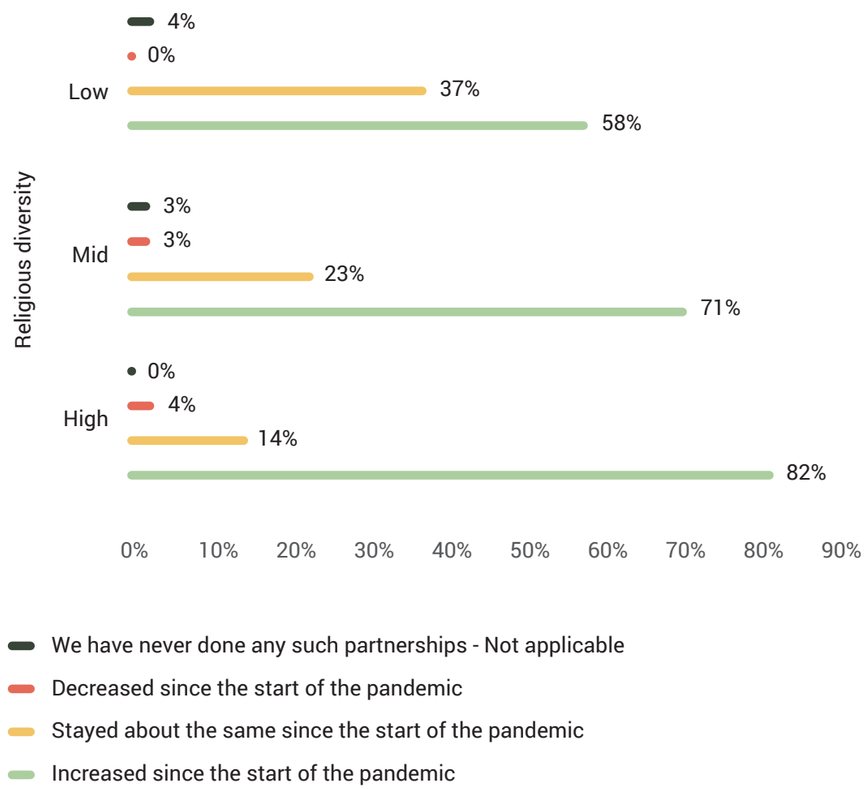


118 respondents (or 61%) chose ‘Very Positive’, 59 (30%) chose ‘Mostly Positive’, whilst the 17 (9%) remaining local authority representatives answering this question chose ‘Neutral’. In other words, not one local authority chose ‘Mostly’ or ‘Very’ Negative’ options, and over 91% chose ‘Very Positive’ or ‘Mostly Positive’.

The perception of increase in the amount of partnership working and the positive experience of partnership working is correlated to areas with high levels of diversity.

This perception of increase in partnership working, and positive experiences associated with it, is closely linked to different rates of population diversity across the UK. Those areas with low or medium levels of population diversity are considerably more likely to think there has been no increase in partnership compared to areas with high levels of diversity.

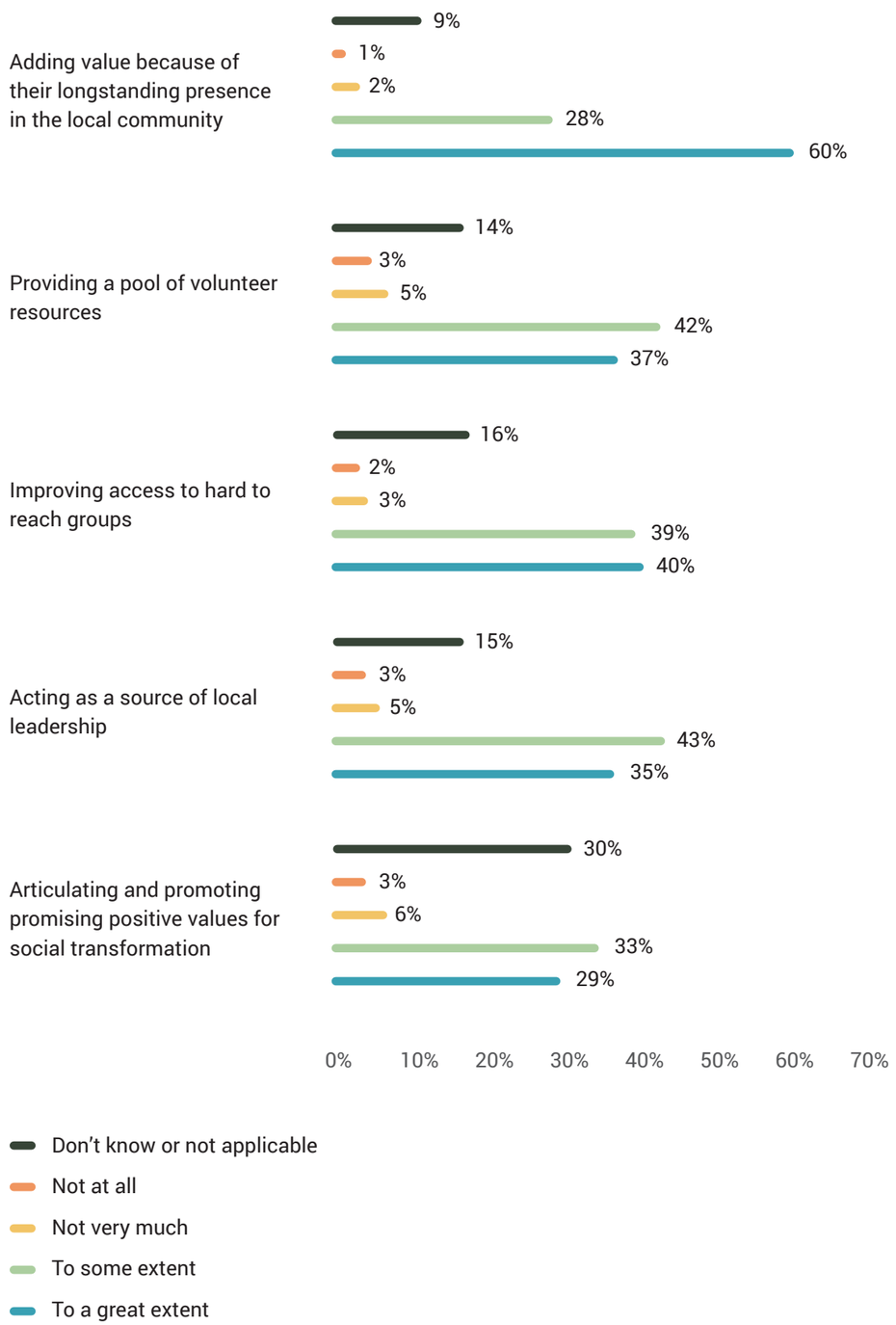
Overall, do you feel that the amount of partnership working between your local authority and faith groups has:

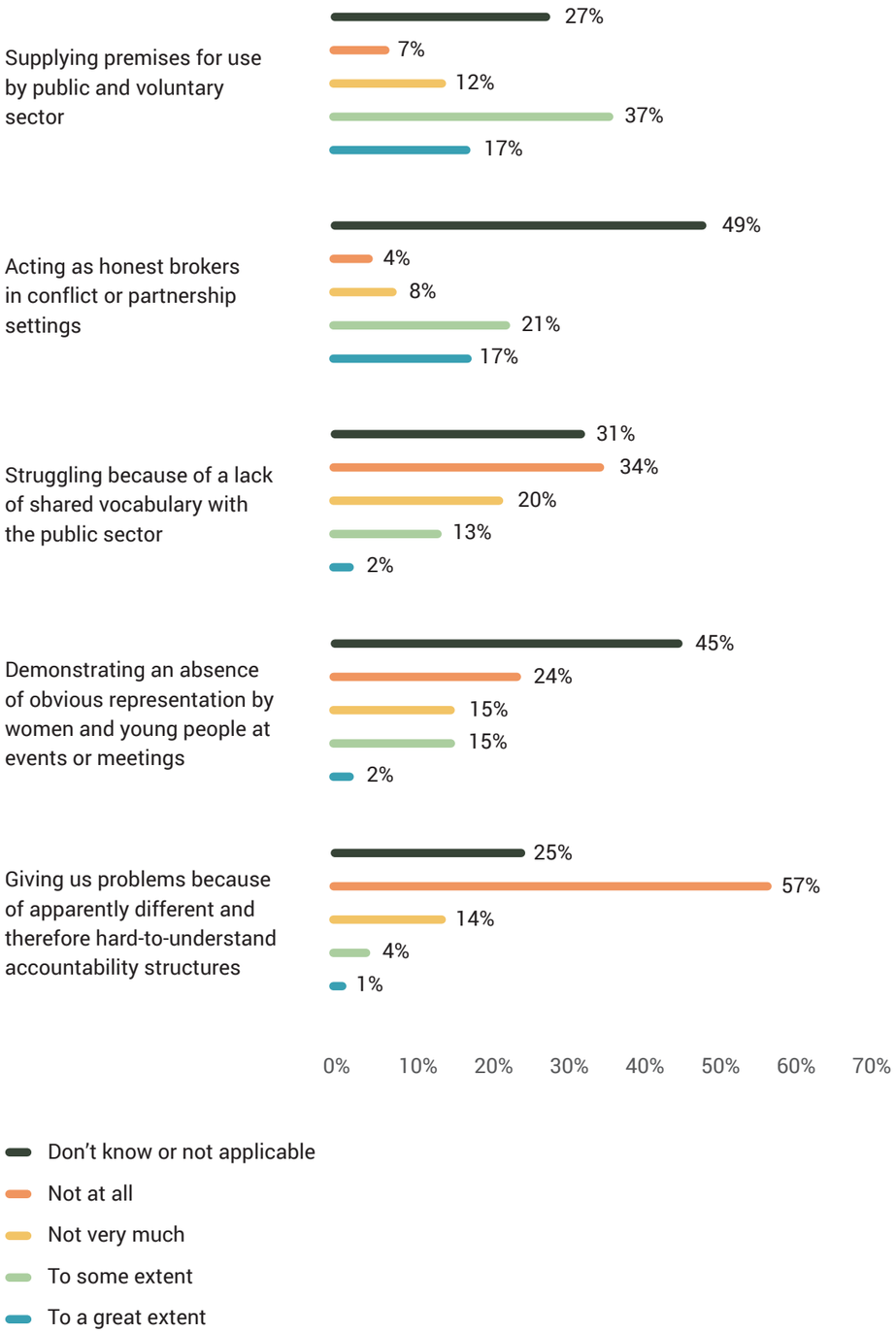


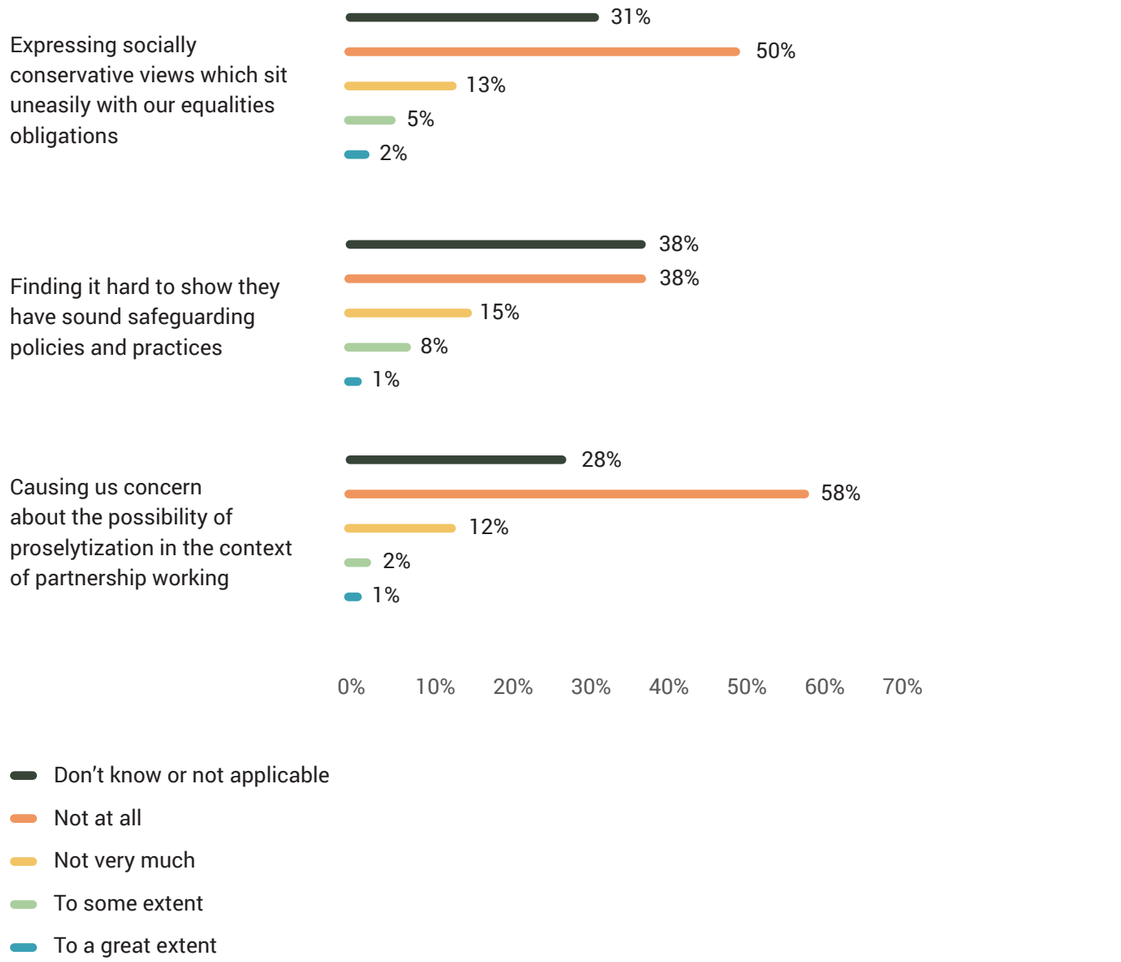
In similar vein, areas of high diversity have a stronger perception of ‘Very Positive’ levels of experience and lower levels at ‘Mostly Positive’ levels of experience, compared to areas of low or medium diversity. Neither are there any ‘Neutral’ perceptions linked to areas of high diversity.

Overall, how would you characterise your experience of partnership working between your local authority and faith groups and faith-based organisations during the pandemic?

Which aspects of working in partnership with faith groups characterise your experience during the COVID-19 pandemic?







Positive attitudes towards partnerships can be understood in more detail by exploring local authorities' responses to a question about other characteristics of their partnerships with faith groups. The characteristics asked about in the survey had been previously identified in the policy and academic literature over the last twenty years, some of which we detailed in our Literature Review.

As can be seen from the graph, the first seven aspects reflect 'positive' aspects associated with faith groups, i.e. those aspects that are seen to contribute to the benefit of society as a whole. The last six reflect more 'negative' aspects i.e. practices and approaches that potentially mitigate against wider good. When the response distribution to these 13 aspects is broken down along these lines, a clear demarcation emerges. Considerably higher scores are attached

to experiences associated with the positive aspects of working in partnership with faith groups than the negative ones.

The aspect attracting the highest level of appreciation from statutory partners is faith groups' ability to add value to partnerships through their longstanding presence in local communities (88% of local authorities agreed that this characterised their experience of working with faith groups either 'to a great extent' or 'to some extent'). Then come a cluster of similarly highly scored aspects and attributes (all just under 80%) which include improving access to hard to reach groups, providing a pool of volunteer resources, and acting as a source of local leadership. The last three aspects include articulating and promoting positive values for social transformation (62%), supplying premises for use by other bodies (54%) and acting as honest brokers in conflict or partnership settings (38%).

The more 'negative' aspects of partnership are more likely to be reported as characterising local authorities' relationships with faith groups either 'not at all' or 'not very much'. This clearly shows that these attributes are seen to have little impact on partnerships between local authorities and faith groups. For example, although faith groups may have different and therefore potentially hard-to-understand accountability structures, 71% of local authority responses report that this aspect is deemed to have 'not very much' or no impact on the experience of working together. 70% of local authority responses suggest that concerns about the possibility of proselytization were similarly absent or minimal. 63% of local authorities reported that 'expressing socially conservative views that sit uneasily with our equalities obligations' characterised their relationships with faith groups either 'not at all' or 'not very much'.

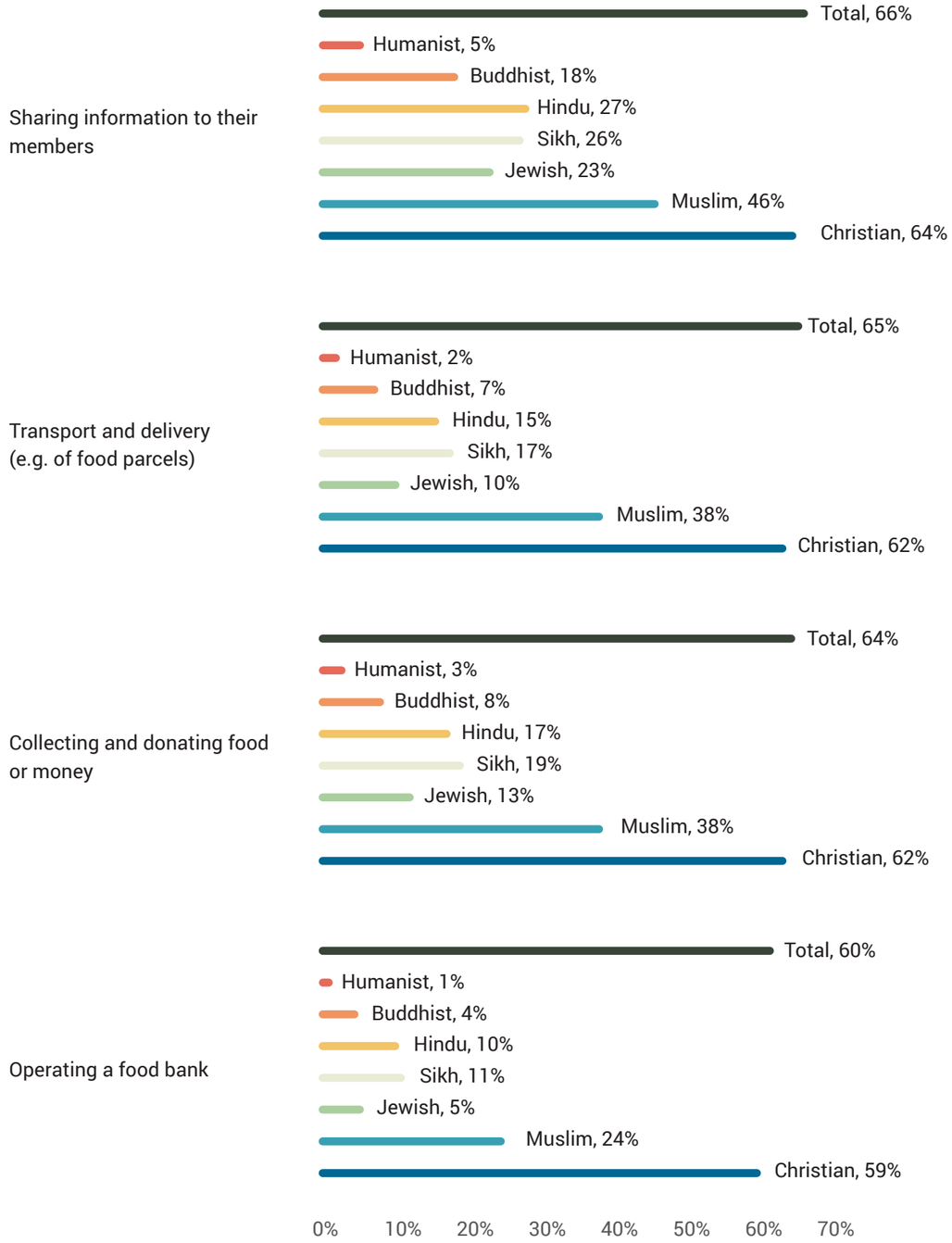
The clear trajectory in favour of positive experiences of what faith groups bring to the partnership table is striking. It suggests that the power of what we might call the 'old shibboleths' associated with religion and belief in the secular imagination – patriarchal and homophobic, hierarchical, resistant to change, prone to irrational beliefs, exclusive and resistant to accountability and scrutiny, and committed to proselytization - which was already waning, is now being even more decisively challenged by the experience of the pandemic.

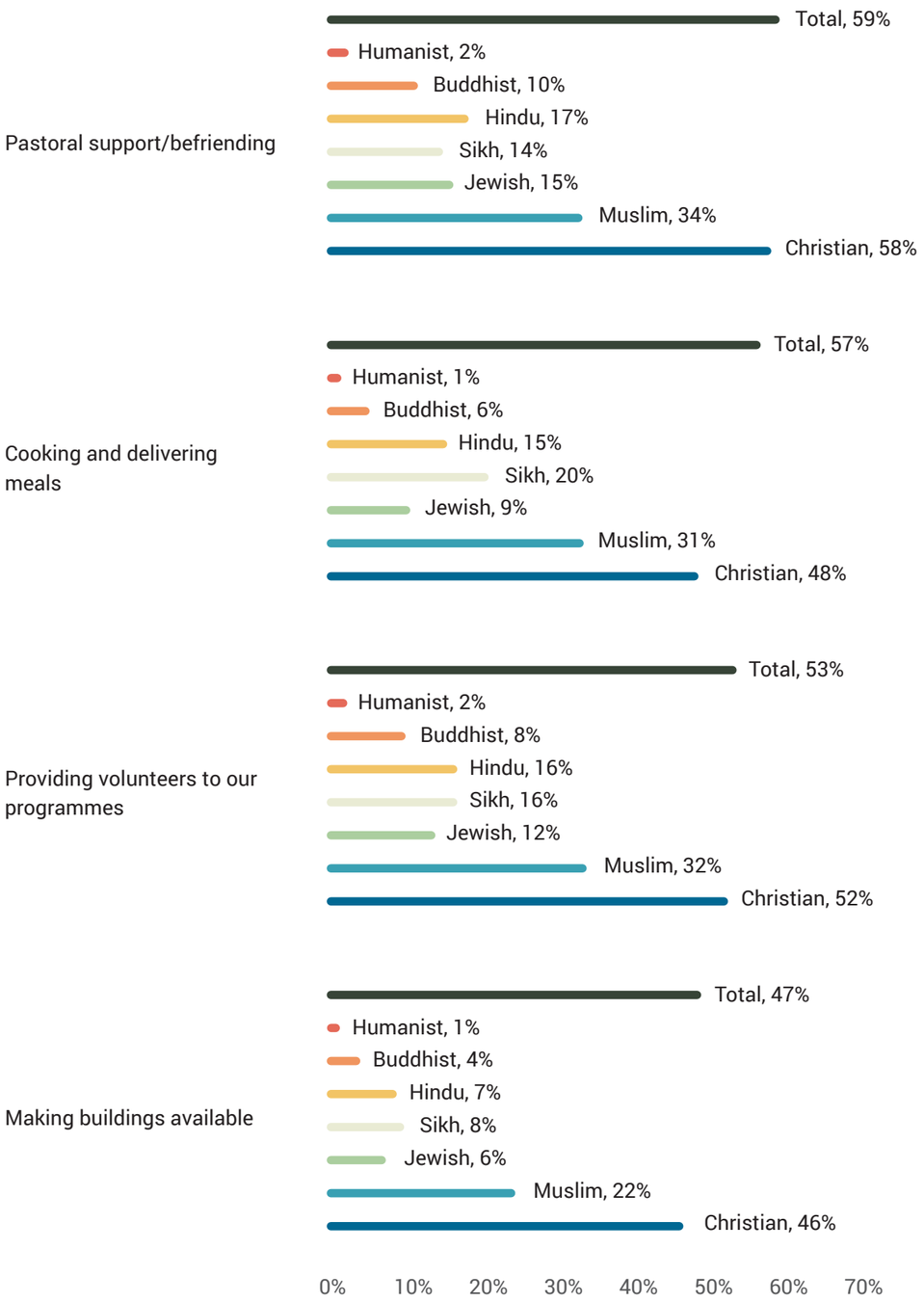
Resource and Innovation

This second theme highlights the current range of activities, as well as the increased provision of goods and services, that faith groups have contributed to the social crises seen during the pandemic.

The assets and resources of a wide range of faith groups were integral to the ways local authorities met the challenges of co-ordinating food distribution to their communities during the pandemic.

How were various faith groups or faith-based organisations involved in your local authority-coordinated food distribution programmes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?





These bars show the number of local authority respondents, from 194 local authorities, who reported that various faith groups had been involved in these ways.

The data graph for this question lists a wide variety of resources that previous research has identified as being those traditionally provided by faith groups (see Literature Review). The research sought to quantify the use of these goods and services by local authorities during the pandemic. The results indicate a high level of use across all the local authorities in the survey, and the depth and consistency of the faith-based response. The graph above identifies the percentage of participating local authorities who used the resources of one or more faith groups or faith-based organisations as part of their food distribution programmes in response to the pandemic. The services that local authorities drew upon most included sharing information with their members (66% of local authorities surveyed), transporting and delivering food parcels (65%) and collecting and donating money for food (62%). 60% of local authorities in the survey involved food banks operated by faith groups or faith-based organisations as part of food distribution programmes that they coordinated. 59% of local authorities involved food banks run by Christian faith groups or faith-based organisations, 24% involved food banks operated by Muslim groups, and 11% involved food banks run by Sikh faith groups.

Faith groups are central to addressing the key issues of food poverty and wellbeing as part of the crisis response to COVID-19

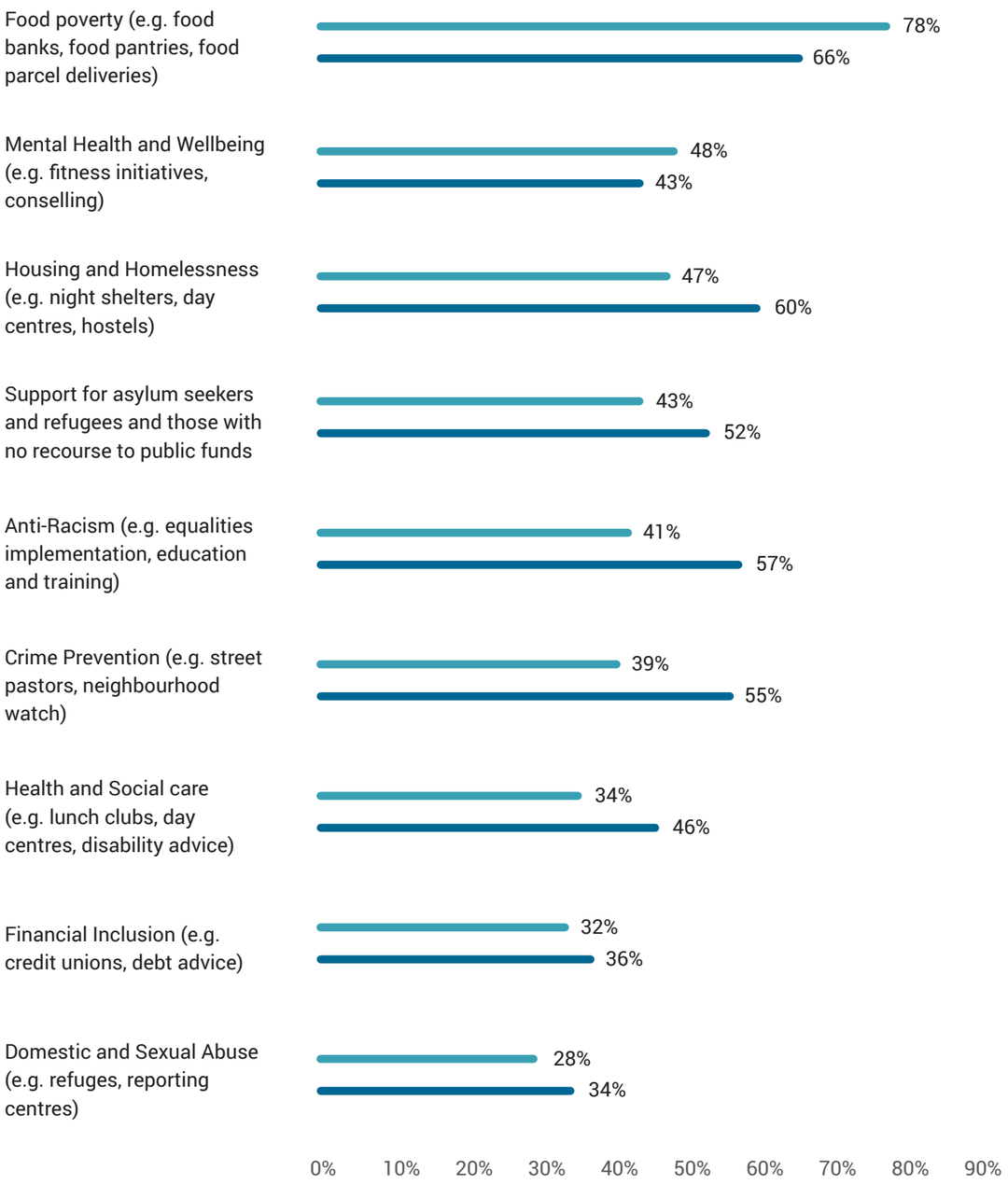
This data is based on an extensive list of the main areas of partnership that have been identified in previous policy reports. The survey asked for data on each category of engagement, with the green column representing activity before COVID-19, and the blue one representing levels of activity since the emergence of the virus.

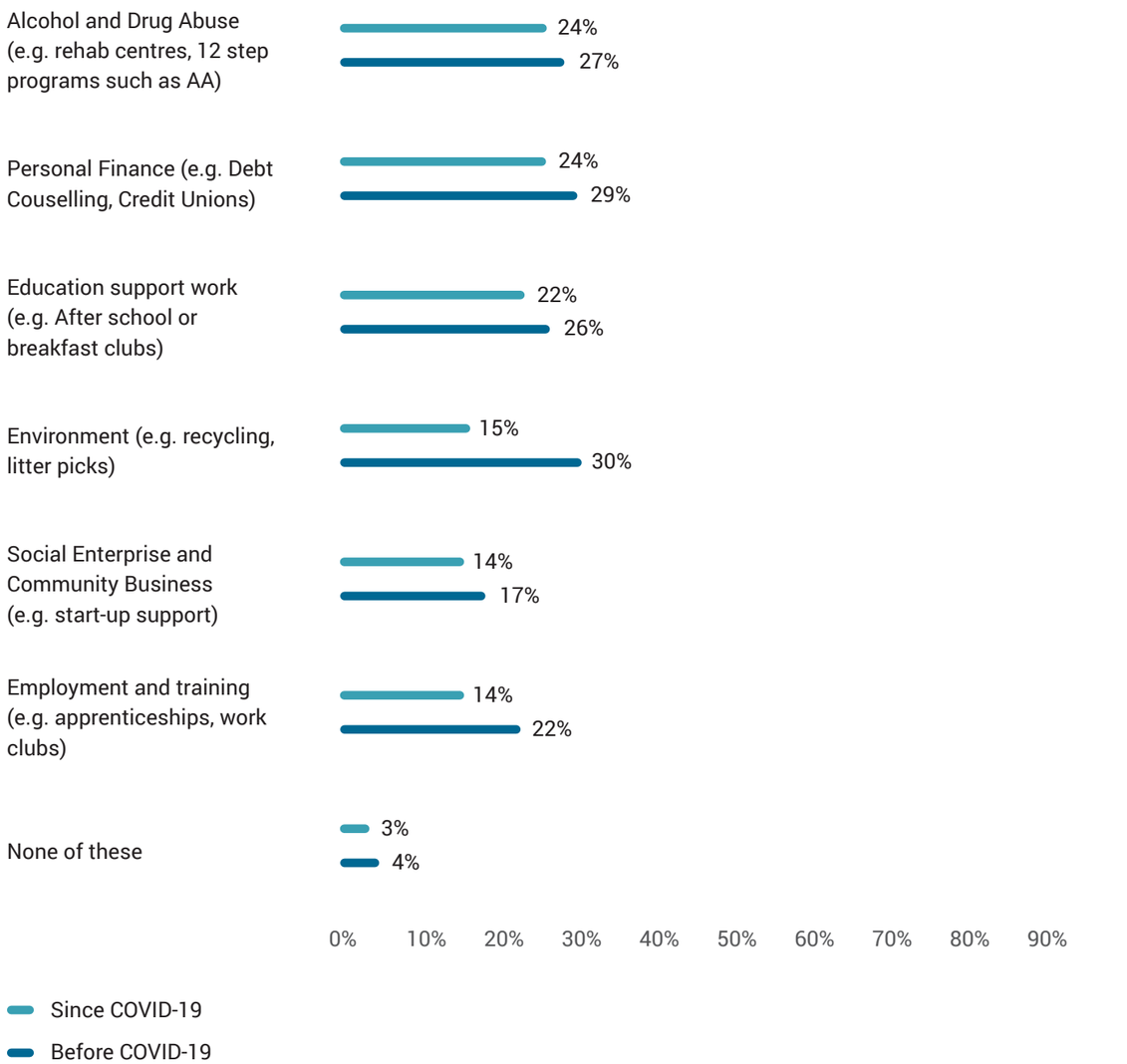
The graph shows that across the 194 authorities, the capacity for engagement has, perhaps not surprisingly, declined across most areas of policy engagement. Much of this might be explained by the shutting down of premises and the furloughing or self-isolating of staff during the pandemic. However, the two significant outliers in this list where activity has increased during the pandemic are food poverty (a rise of 12% in the number of authorities identifying partnership working with faith groups) and mental health and wellbeing (a rise in 7%). This rise could be interpreted not only as a response to increased demand, but also reflecting the fact that many faith groups could have diverted their resources to these areas of engagement to compensate for the restrictions imposed on their other community welfare and outreach functions during lockdown. It suggests that the response of faith groups has been central to the ability and effectiveness of local authorities to deal effectively with the most severe social impacts caused by the first wave of the virus.

Faith groups and faith-based organisations are integral providers of new food distribution programmes as a response to COVID-19

The survey identifies the range of new initiatives designed to combat food poverty and destitution in the light of the pandemic. In three out of the seven categories, the level of faith-based provision is located between that of the local authority and other voluntary sector groups i.e. setting up new food banks, cooking and delivering meals and emergency breakfast or lunch clubs. The lowest area of involvement by faith groups has been in the replacement of free school meals by food voucher schemes.

On which issues was your local authority working in partnership with faith groups and faith-based organisations before and since the start of COVID-19 (tick as many boxes as appropriate)





New food distribution programmes set up in your Local Authority Area (by any statutory agency, or voluntary or faith group) in response to COVID-19?

Faith groups are establishing new partnerships with secular partners in key areas of policy response to COVID-19

The survey asked local authorities to identify those policy areas where they are aware of new partnerships having emerged with faith groups since COVID-19. Faith groups are seen as increasingly significant players in voluntary sector and cross-sector partnerships (reported by 72% of respondents). They are also integral to initiatives diffusing important services and information to vulnerable and hard to access groups (71%). An increasing number of local authority clients are being signposted or referred to faith group providers (69%).

New partnerships developed since COVID-19 between your local authority and local faith groups

Other types of partnership seeing significant growth include voluntary collaborations with faith groups on service delivery and helping to develop better policy through information sharing. Just over half the local authority responses said that they were prepared to temporarily fund the faith sector. By contrast, partnerships involving more formalised and strategic arrangements in the coproduction of polices and services, and contracts for services are the two areas of partnership with the least growth.

This graph indicates that the strongest growth in partnerships is at the more traditional end of the partnership spectrum (i.e. faith groups are the non-technical partners whose job it is to mediate resources between clients and providers through activities like signposting and outreach to the vulnerable). However, some countervailing data such as the strong growth in referrals from the council to faith-based services does suggest progress in fostering engagement at the more strategic end of the partnership spectrum. Here partnership is engaged not around the mediation of another's services, but around the active co-production of goods, services and innovation.

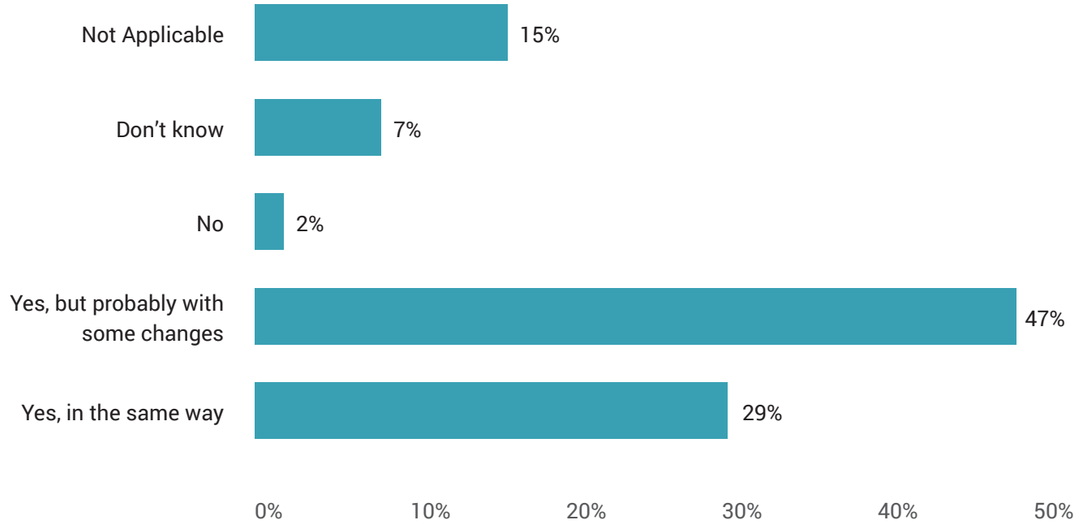
Strategic Futures

This section highlights the willingness of local authorities to develop their relationships with faith groups and apply new learning to improving policy in the future.

There is a strong expectation from local authorities that partnerships developed with faith groups during the pandemic will continue

An overwhelming majority of participating councils and local authorities - some 76% - stated that they were keen for new partnerships with faith communities to continue into a post-COVID-19 policy landscape. Only three councils (or less than 2%) answered 'No' to this.

If you have developed new partnerships with faith groups during the pandemic, do you expect these to continue when the pandemic subsides?

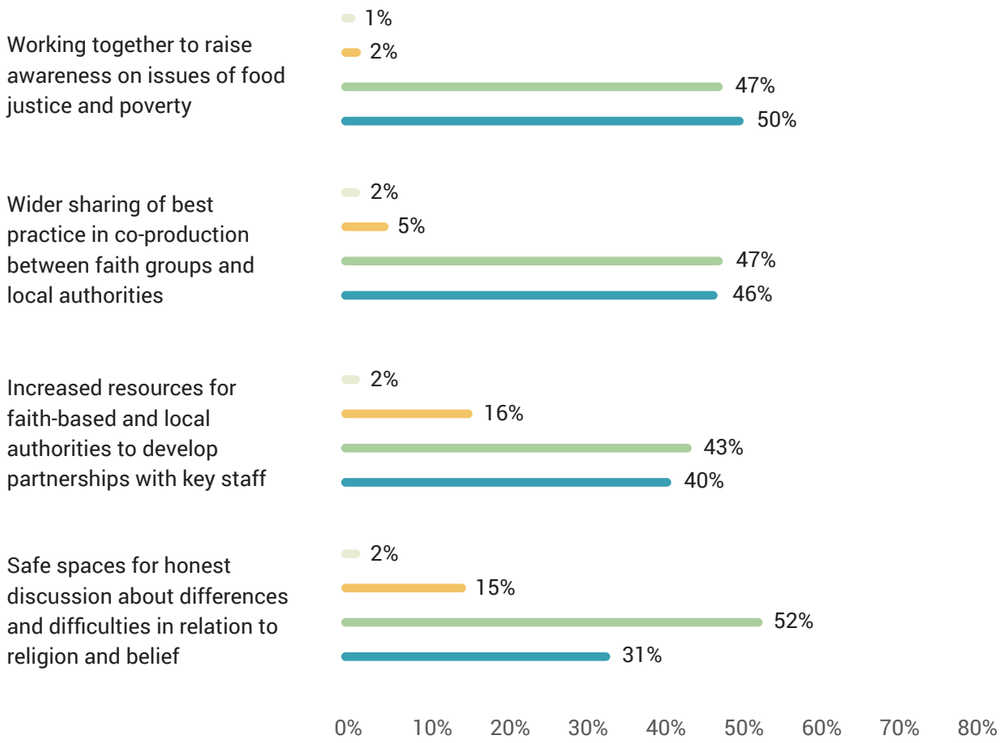


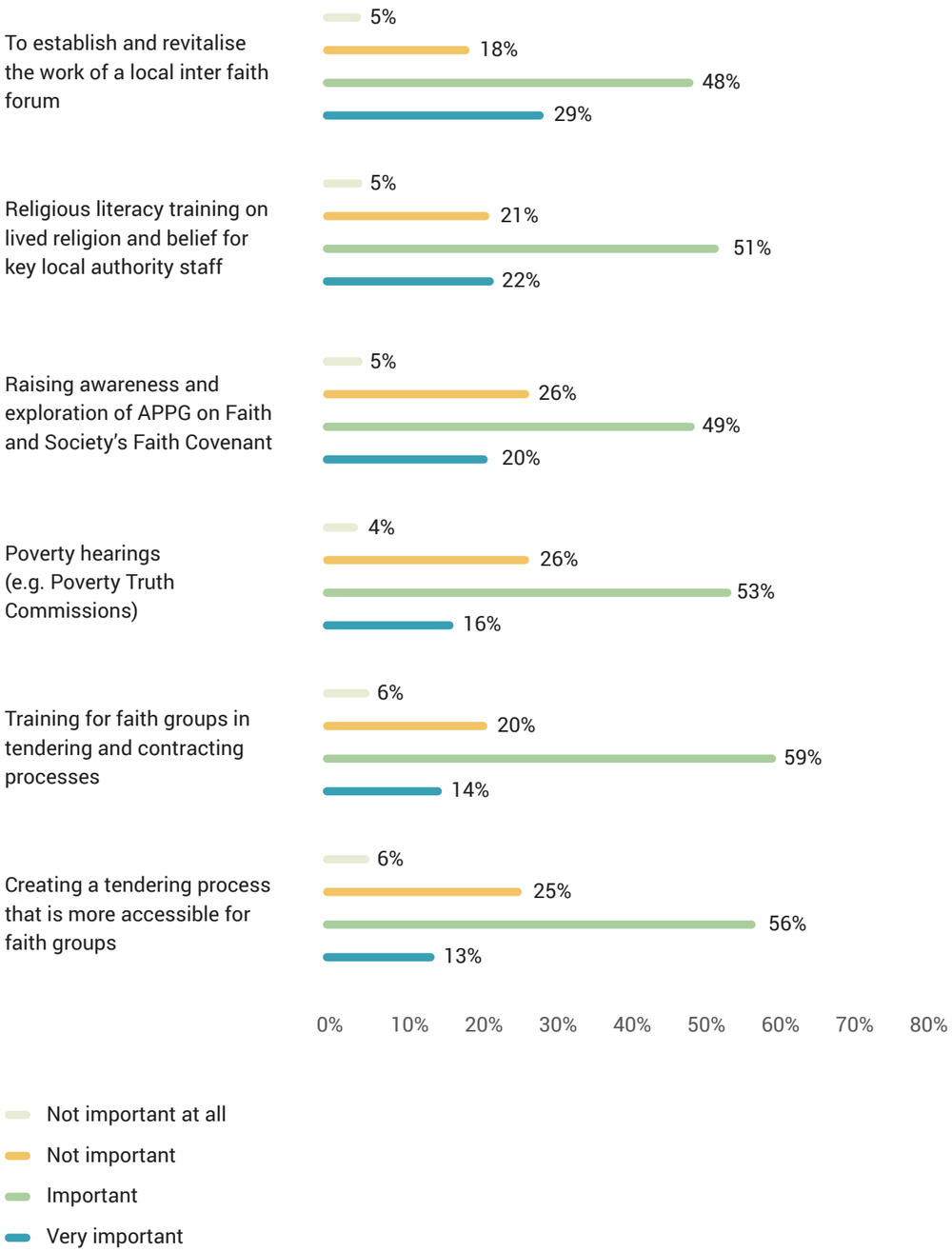
However, what is more interesting for future policy developments is that 47% of local authorities wanted to continue their partnerships on the basis of change rather than more of same. In other words, with an expectation of creating a new and different approach.

The survey then identified areas of future priority for local authorities that these continuing partnerships might tackle. A number of options reflecting current issues were identified from the policy literatures, and each initiative was scored by local authorities on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'Very Important' to not 'Very Important'. The responses for the 'Very Important' and 'Important' options are now presented for each initiative.

What this table suggests is that those policy initiatives that have been around for some time and have become well-established bridges between local authorities and faith groups (e.g. training for faith groups on tendering and procurement, religious literacy training, poverty hearings, interfaith groups), whilst still considered to be considerably important, are not perceived as the top priorities for the future.

Which initiatives would be of value or relevance to your local authority?





Instead, the top priorities now suggest an engagement based on relationship and shared experience – a shift to exploring and reflecting on what works in practice (i.e. the performative), rather than top-down initiatives that assume that everyone agrees this is a good issue to address (the normative). Thus the top three priorities reflect different aspects of a more proactive and egalitarian form of co-production: sharing the responsibility for awareness raising; sharing best practice of what works (not necessarily what should work); and creating safe spaces for an honest sharing of what really matters and the shared values that underpin them.

The figures in support of these three priorities suggest a deep shift in perceptions about how local authorities anticipate their relationship with faith groups and faith-based organisations will change in the future. Well over 90% of 194 local authorities identify sharing best practice in co-production with faith groups as a top priority, and over 80% of them welcome the creation of safe spaces to discuss what causes difficulty in partnerships for the sake of deeper and more honest communication.

The fourth most strongly supported priority seems to recognise that this deep shift in working practices needs resourcing so that these new ways of collaborating can be sustained. We now turn to the qualitative sources of this research, generated by both the interviews and the free text from the survey, to triangulate the reliability of the survey data, including that suggestion that local authority and faith group partnerships during the pandemic have interacted across three fields of engagement: relationships, resource and innovation, and future strategy.

6
Analysis: the interviews

The interview schedule allowed our interviewees from both local authorities and faith groups and faith-based organisations to reflect on the current activities in their particular area that have emerged since the pandemic and what some of the drivers might be for these activities. The questions then delved a little deeper into the experience of the pandemic, and its impact on relationships and practices. They asked where points of connection and natural communication had been recognised, and where possible points of tension or miscommunication might have occurred. Finally, the question was posed as to whether the experience of partnership working during the pandemic had changed perceptions of the role that local authorities and faith groups should play in the future.

The local authorities and faith-based organisations we spoke to were engaged in partnerships covering areas as diverse as poverty, emergency food distribution, work with rough sleepers and homeless, addiction, prison rehabilitation, refugee and asylum work, and employment training. After coding, eight organising themes were consistently represented. These themes describe some of the aspects of relationship and partnership that have emerged from dealing with the trauma of COVID-19 in local and often vulnerable communities, and its ongoing aftermath.

Responding rapidly to lockdown

A recurring theme that emerges from the interview data is the sense of shock and disorientation that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the initial UK lockdown. A local authority lead from a rural area recalls:

> 'Right in the beginning it was incredibly intense. We had never done anything like this before. And we were making up as we went along. And responding to circumstances that were unfolding and changing on a daily basis. And so we didn't have anything at the beginning.'

Another local authority interviewee, this time from an inner-urban authority remarked,

> 'In mid-March, when lockdown happened, I realised that the council needed to increase food supply in the area very quickly. We had never done it before. I took the task of organising it. We created as quickly as we could eight community hubs for food and information distribution, drawing together volunteer groups, including faith groups who could potentially get involved in food distribution. It was very much "What's the quickest route we have got of getting the money out, of getting that support out there."'

Many faith group and faith-based providers also recalled that there was nothing in place to ensure the provision of essential food and medical supplies to many individuals and groups who suddenly found themselves in shielding or lockdown situations. One interviewee from a faith-based organisation said 'There was this kind of window of about a month where you felt folks just didn't know how to respond to what was going on… we were looking for a process to be started to be put in place. There was nothing.' The priest of a town centre parish church, which also ran a coffee shop and dementia café recalls, 'We pushed rapidly at the start as there was the realisation that there was nothing in place. And when we started there was this few weeks of just confusion, and we started to hear from folks who were having needs, and the council were not aware.' Another faith-based leader who works closely with their rural local authority recalled 'Obviously at the very beginning of the pandemic emergency, food was a key challenge – a problem. Lots of people going hungry, not able to get food and the food banks were faced with drying up of their usual donations because people were not going shopping, people were not going to church or mosque and leaving food at the back.'

The picture that emerges is both local authorities and faith groups/faith-based providers responding in an immediate way, drawing on existing contacts and projects, and re-purposing them as quickly as they could for emergency food distribution and support. The overriding theme is one of togetherness to face a common challenge and provide for those most immediately at risk.

Admiration and respect

A recurring motif that emerges from both sides is the sense of admiration and respect for each other's work in response to an immediate crisis and its subsequent aftermath. One Council lead reflects, 'I am not a person of faith but I have been incredibly inspired by a lot of the faith activism in my area. Practical faith if you like. Really quite inspiring.' Another statutory leader is similarly impressed. 'My personal admiration for faith groups has gone through the roof, just in terms of their commitment there. We as a local authority didn't know what we were getting into. And they have got involved with smiles on their faces and they've done it professionally. They have more than stepped up to the challenge. And… when we are surrounded by people who haven't been able to step up, it makes the people who do step up even more relevant and important than before.' A local authority outreach lead, working in the area of social justice reflects, 'Some of the more difficult stuff is where some of the faith groups have stepped forward… the asylum seeker and refugee communities, some of whom are destitute, and [have] no recourse to public funds.'

From a faith perspective, several were grateful for the ongoing guidance and support from their local authority, which had often been there originally, but which was now coming into its own as faith-based providers sought to increase their capacity. One respondent recalls 'X city council is a good council to work with. They have always been supportive of our work. They fund a lot of community work across the city. We have always had good and helpful feedback on our work.' Another faith-based provider is impressed and grateful, not only for the resources their council provided in support of their distribution of emergency food aid and social support, but the spirit in which it was offered. 'We said to the council, "We need to find somewhere else to store the additional food." And they were great, they went and looked for different places, talked to different partners in the local area. We had

the Head of Regeneration doing this for us. The local theatre arts college offered us one of their studios, which has been absolutely brilliant. Really practical stuff like helping us getting the drivers coming in, when people were on lockdown.'

These positive recordings of mutual admiration and respect triggered by the experience of the pandemic, some of which were pre-existing but some of which are new, form the important foundations for developing the sense of trust and reciprocity that will be required for deeper and more sustained collaborations in a post COVID-19 civil society space.

Shared values

The pandemic has highlighted not only the importance of rediscovering the values that underpin the sort of response that has thus far been seen in response to the challenges of the pandemic, and the motivations they inspire, but also the extent to which these values are shared. One local authority lead based in a small city authority reflects, 'It's clear there are people that have the same kind of motivation and values as other people have. And that is based on, you know, a mutual respect and understanding and a kind of non-judgmental approach and that's with each other, as well as the communities that we serve.' Another colleague, based in the same context, amplifies the range of values they see coming into play in the new spaces of collaboration that are opening up.

> 'It's the argument I make about the volunteer sector; that it's underpinned by good values of altruism, benevolence, kindness, generosity and patience. These are good values. These are good morals. These are good principles. To be governed by them is no bad thing. And the faith sector share similar values, but I think they can be more explicit.'

Meanwhile, a faith-based service provider located in a deprived inner-urban context reflects on the nature of the relationship they have developed with their council over the years. 'They've been supportive of our work. We have really good discussions on a regular basis with individual council officers. I think the degree to shared values that motivate both of us is a commitment to overcoming poverty.' Another faith-based respondent was interested in the impact of the pandemic on interfaith relations. For this contributor, common values between faith traditions are not so much discovered through discussion as unearthed through joint, practical action. 'Partnership is about looking for win-win relationships, and looking for common ground. Different faith groups don't need to share anything in common, except the desire that where we live is a better place.'

One thing the pandemic seems to have done is highlight the often hidden but powerful ways it has prompted many people to explore what connects and binds them together as citizens, rather than what disconnects and ruptures. The pandemic has been an opportunity for what one council leader memorably called 'pooling together commonalities' in ways that may be as much symbolic as they are legislated for.

An example of this, shared by many interviewees, recalled the way Ramadan and Eid coincided with the height of the pandemic. Requests were made by many mosques to be allowed to relay the call to prayer during this holy month as a way of bringing together many Muslims who were having to self-isolate or who were prevented from attending the mosque due to lockdown restrictions. After careful local consultations, the decision, was taken by many local authorities to allow the public broadcasting of the call to prayer. The overall effect however was to resonate for the wider, non-Muslim community, the values of solidarity, respect for the needs of others, and hospitality. A social cohesion lead manager reflected that it prompted them to imagine more empathically the needs of 'asylum seekers and refugees', and what the lockdown would mean for those whose 'lives are very precarious at this time, and whose access to their faith was very limited'.

A discovery of the importance of shared values, or at least a rediscovery of this fact, is another 'push' factor in an increasingly confident repositioning of both faith groups and statutory authorities into a potentially more collaborative space.

Strengthening pre-existing relationships

The desire to build on and strengthen existing relationships between local authorities and faith groups may have been an aspiration that would have developed over time, but it certainly seems to have been accelerated and deepened by the COVID-19 experience. The strength of existing relationships, and the stability and levels of trust they generate, were essential in the effective provision of services to date. One faith respondent in a busy inner-city authority reflected, 'A lot of council leads we already knew because we had good working relationships to start with. So, that was easy enough to pick up the phone or drop an email to someone to ask any questions or if there's any issues about the food or deliveries coming through. We were able to get through to them straightaway. Some of the [council] people were new in but had the right type of attitude with us…they already knew us, and…were happy to work with us..'

Others observed that existing relationships had been strengthened because of the pandemic. One council lead for a campaign to co-ordinate feeding programmes across a large city observed that 'The relationships with the churches and faith sector generally that have supported us in the past have strengthened during COVID-19. And there has been a more proactive relationship from the faith groups themselves.' A faith-based respondent reflects that local authority partners are making a noticeable effort not to take offence at beliefs or values that they may not agree with, for the sake of preserving the good and harmonious relationships that have been built up since the pandemic. 'If you as a council person wanted to choose to work with faith communities, you could easily find a reason to not do so. You can pick something that was controversial about a number of agendas and say, "I can't work with these people if that's what they believe." Since the pandemic, I sense that people have chosen not to behave and work like that. I think there's now a fairly healthy relationship of both cooperation and collaboration across the faith communities with the local public sector. Of course, there's always more that could be done.'

Governance and Partnership

The interview data has already identified that one source of admiration on the part of local authorities towards their faith-based partners was their professionalism, which had made it easier to put together joint initiatives at very short notice. The question of perceptions of professionalism brings to the fore the theme of governance. Are the new insights around shared values, and a renewed sense of admiration and respect for the assets that faith groups have contributed to the pandemic response, beginning to prompt a recalibration of how professional partnerships might need to be imagined – perhaps on a more equal and accountable basis? As one faith-based contributor noted, the way their local authority worked with faith groups before COVID-19 felt like '… being a junior partner, which is not a comfortable feeling.'

One approach to governance evidenced by the data highlights the expectation that it is primarily about

complying with necessary legislation around issues such as health and safety, diversity and inclusion and safeguarding vulnerable people. One local authority interviewee expressed confidence they could work with faith communities over the pandemic, because they knew that these faith communities had already been through the relevant training and assessments. 'We have certainly found that based on our relationships pre-COVID we knew that this group would come in and they would adhere to all of the kind of regulations that we've had to put in place. They're following all the social distancing planning and all of that kind of stuff, and that shows their ability to absolutely step up to the mark and continue delivering.'

Another contributor from the statutory sector identifies a slightly broader definition – one that allows for the contribution and interplay of attitudes and approaches, as well as legal processes. They suggest that faith groups can allay any residual suspicions concerning their motivations or ability to do the job by bringing the following attributes to the partnership table: 'It's about good interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and the ability to be proactive with that reassurance that there is transparent accountability, that there are cool business policies and procedures in place like safeguarding. That people are trained, that they aren't amateurs, that they operate to the same levels of due diligence and have a robust proven track record as anybody else. They need to be proactive with that.'

As well as adherence to proper regulations, and good interpersonal skills, a faith-based provider suggests that allowing faith groups to align their actions and initiatives with what they call their 'tenets' of belief would also be an invaluable contribution to good governance. 'My experience is as soon as good trusting working relationships are established, then that which could be a problem is often not a problem. People will align around the things that they want to do jointly rather than major on some of the things they might want to argue about. It has regularly been my experience that where people see what faith communities are wanting to do, then they want to align with their endeavours. Local government strategies and policies don't need to weigh in against the tenets of the individual faiths.'

However, one local authority leader identifies perhaps the most far-reaching agenda for a reconfigured partnership relationship, based on their experience of working with faith-groups during the pandemic. 'The main thing I will keep coming back to is relationship, and that I suppose is about a commitment to a way of working that is open and inclusive and collaborative and codesigned and doing our best to understand each other's worlds. I think all partners and indeed our own staff found that way of working to be liberating and empowering in the emergency phase.' 'Doing our best to understand each other's worlds' is a striking phrase that suggests a commitment to a deep empathy that can only come about through listening to the experience of others, and reflecting on the values that drive them. The idea of empathy brings to the governance and partnership debate a value that expresses a willingness to work in a relationship of deep equality. It also generates more satisfying and creative work. This participant observes that the principles associated with empathy – inclusion, collaboration and co-design – were 'liberating' for both their council employees but also the partners they were working with, including faith groups.

These fruitful reflections move the dial over issues of governance and partnership working between local authorities and the faith sector. Whilst recognising that compliance over regulations is important, the significant role of interpersonal skills, aligning practices to 'tenets' and the role of empathy have also been highlighted as essential elements for future partnership success.

Innovation in service design and delivery

Given all that has been reported in the data so far about coming together in a crisis to improvise and experiment for the sake of effective service delivery, it is not surprising that the emergence of innovative and creative responses was regularly alluded to in the data. Many local authorities reflected with some amazement on how they managed to set up systems of distribution and referral within a matter of weeks that would have normally taken months or even years, Some have gone as far as redesigning their emergency response infrastructure, in light of the unprecedented impact of the pandemic on all aspects of society. For example, one authority abolished its centralised emergency response structure into 10 delegated cells, each with responsibility for one policy area (such as young people, the elderly, business etc.) This new delegated structure has expanded the opportunities for expertise and knowledge from across the whole community to be deployed, including faith groups who are providing leadership of some of the cells. This newly delegated way of working has continued, aided by digital platforms, as the policy focus moves from an emergency to a rescue and recovery phase.

One faith-based charity lead, with several years of fundraising under their belt, raises the question of how these less centralised and more bespoke ways of working in partnership will be funded in the future. They reflect, 'A new way of working through bad situations, you always get some amazing inventions that can be a really good. We all need to come away from the competitive side of fundraising and tendering that there has been in the last 10 years and look more seriously at partnership. Sometimes when we're working with other voluntary sector people, there is that competitive feel… we're all chasing the same little pots of money. This experience of the pandemic has been very different.'

Another consistent theme in the data explores how the move to the online world because of self-isolation and lockdown has been a surprising source of innovation. This research has found that use of digital communication platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Chatbox is being experienced in three ways; as a form of exclusion, as a form of inclusion, and the urgent need to create new forms of etiquette around the use of these tools to avoid people feeling overwhelmed or burnt out.

As regards tackling exclusion, examples that emerged included a faith group taking the initiative in working with other charities to provide free iPads and laptops to marginalised communities such as asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, as well as those within isolated Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities with no means to pay for connectivity to essential goods and services. Another local authority teamed up with a faith-based food distributor working with vulnerable and off-grid individuals to provide mobile phones that could be distributed with the food parcels. These individuals could then maintain contact with their food providers, access other goods and services and link up with more people in the locality.

In terms of digital inclusion, many respondents commented on the beneficial consequences of moving to online meetings as a response to the pandemic. First there was the enhanced ability, created by digital meeting platforms, to hold ongoing and regular meetings between faith groups and local authorities. Meetings and networks that were scrambled as an immediate crisis response can now be patterned on a long-term and sustainable footing. Here is a typical response from a local authority via the survey: 'We have established a Faiths Group that meets every two weeks and through which we share information, test out changes and initiatives and work with them to distribute key messages as we strive to establish the right behaviours in our communities.'

Key to a shift towards inclusion is the numbers and diversity of local citizens who can participate in policy formation processes. One faith-based manager of a health project working in a multi-faith setting with high levels of deprivation reflects how initial conversations with their council around emergency food distribution quickly moved into areas of mental health, physical wellbeing, discrimination and social isolation. This extended extract identifies well the multi-layered ways in which increased inclusion and participation can also lead to increased effectiveness in joined up thinking, public scrutiny, a diversity of voices and opinions, and service delivery.

> 'But the deputy leader of the council, who was actually chairing these COVID-19 meetings said, "We need to keep this going. This has been really helpful. And we need to keep it." And so we widened it. We've brought in a number of voluntary sector organisations, and public health to a wider forum that meets on Zoom. It's easier on Zoom and Teams to include more people. We don't have to worry about the size of the room booking or whether people can sort of, you know, make it. We have people who come onto Zoom and they can dip in and they can move out. And we've got the Chat Box. So people can actually have their say, even if they're not confident about speaking in public. It's been a very good development and has included so many more people. We're now looking at the equalities strand, and trying to bring in people who can represent not only faith groups, but also people with disabilities and women's groups. We are now looking very closely at the data that Public Health England is giving to us. But I found that to be not restricting, but actually quite empowering.'

Faith groups are also pioneering the use of digital resources to meet the needs of their own communities – such as online prayer and meditation sessions and online worship services. There is some early evidence to suggest that local authorities are aware of the potential of these new forms of digital connectivity to promote wellbeing and combat social isolation in the wider community. One free text comment left by a local authority respondent on the survey observed, 'It would be good to further explore the positive aspects of the pandemic caused by the enforced move online, as this has provided a non-daunting way in for people wishing to learn more about faith, and a way in for people to continue to follow their faith wherever they live, especially in a rural area. It is also reassuring for people who are now nervous about returning to places of worship to be able to participate online, and a familiar way in for a younger demographic.'

A third discussion around the digital is also beginning to emerge around the etiquette of digital participation. One respondent observed a discomfort from a council over how meeting minutes should be kept – and if not, then how would action points and decisions be recorded, shared and then monitored. Another early point of tension revolves around the exponential growth in meetings, which may serve the needs of institutional bodies such as councils or large faith group infrastructures but can easily de-incentivise activists and volunteers. A faith co-ordinator from a rural authority records that some of their faith-based reps already potentially struggle with meeting fatigue. 'There was one or two of them saying, "Do we have to do all this stuff each week? We are practical people. We are here because we want to see the practical stuff happen."'

Some Ongoing Tensions

Some interviewees expressed experiences that highlighted ongoing tensions between faith groups, faith-based organisations and local authorities. Whilst a minority position, their views nevertheless represent an important critical perspective on the direction of travel, drawing particular attention to issues of power, and the right for faith groups to offer a dissenting narrative based on their long-term perspectives and deep visions about the nature of society. There was ongoing concern that the methods used by faith groups (for example unaffiliated food banks) would create inappropriate dependency relationships with vulnerable clients. Some reflected that many faith groups were populated with declining and aged membership bases and did not have the necessary resources to contribute to the pandemic.

By contrast, other statutory contributors noted that the faith sector could be over-populated by too many independent enterprises, each making a separate contribution to food poverty such as a food bank but refusing to work in partnership with other faith-based or secular local actors. The rationale of these groups appears to be to gain market share, rather than addressing issues in a collaborative way. This lack of joined-up structure makes it difficult for local authorities to be amenable to partnership working. There were also some perceptions that faith groups were instinctively indifferent to areas of law such as health and safety regulations. This indifference often came to a head over issues such as the requirement to observe social distancing at religious events and festivals, safeguarding and food hygiene during the pandemic. Finally, in contradiction to some of the previous observations, there was a small body of views that suggested that faith groups had been unresponsive to the invitations from local authorities to join in initiatives to promote community safety. As one local authority lead commented 'I would have like to see more faith groups contact us rather than always us reaching out'.

From a faith-based perspective, some voices expressed concern at the resilience and capacity of their local authorities to translate warm words about deepening relationships and collaboration into future policy developments. One observed, 'They are simply exhausted.' Another food hub manager reflects, 'I think what's important is that we don't lose what we have. I have heard some people in the council say, "Let's go back to normal." If normal means that the lessons learned from COVID-19 are simply going back to being strapped onto the computer. If going back to normal means we're back to our desks doing what we used to do then that would really be a huge opportunity missed for the council.'

Other interviewees reported a suspicion that a residual mistrust and antagonism to religion remains in town and city hall corridors. This observer reflects this perspective with great clarity. 'Discussions with the local authority are always difficult because it's not an equal discussion. A lot of the faith organisations are involved in community interventions, and a lot of people in authority think you are bonkers if you've got faith. "Can they be trusted? They're a bit odd." There's all that stuff goes on within the meetings.' Another faith-based provider, running a homeless project in an inner urban project reported 'Our sector tends towards the hard left ideologically, politically, which pivots towards a constructionist, secularist's ideal in which the faith institutions are the old enemy. We might as well be monarchy!' Meanwhile, a Muslim faith leader reported their perplexity at persistent requests from social cohesion officers for physical access to mosques during lockdown. The expressed reason was to ensure safety messaging on the conducting of funerals was widely dispersed to Muslim

communities. The respondent offered multiple ways of transmitting the message along email channels and social media, on the basis that no-one was attending mosque in observance of government lockdown guidelines. The persistent nature of the requests made them suspicious of an ulterior motive for wanting access to the mosques. 'I sense if I'm completely honest they wanted a way in to communicate with mosques during this lockdown, you know, to continue to do Prevent work. But obviously, there's a toxicity and a suspicion around it.' Case studies such as these suggest that local authorities still have a deficit of suspicion to overcome if faith groups are to feel comfortable engaging in more co-productive forms of social delivery.

Future directions of travel

Several respondents used the interview to reflect on the implications of the pandemic experience for the way in which the policy and civil society space might evolve in the future. Reflection fell broadly into two sets. The first set reflected what we might call an 'organic' view of growth and development. This view sees the experience of the pandemic as a largely hopeful exercise in restoring and revitalising local democracy. As local communities have had to largely arrange their own emergency responses to the pandemic, so this has opened up new forms of connection and communication across ideological and bureaucratic lines. Local groups and institutions have learned to be more accountable to each other, and listen more closely to experiences, in order to provide effective solutions. One faith-based respondent was content that processes of coming together should be allowed to just evolve naturally, rather than necessarily being strategically planned. 'This is just kind of how it should be, that we should be working in partnership with other groups... I feel like we're just doing what we should be doing… a local congregation working in partnership with other key players in the community, doing things together. I think for some of the volunteers that have joined the group, it may be a bit of an eye opener that the church can be involved as part of that network, and have a kind of organising role. It's all about building relationships, it's a lot of work on local democracy. The work that we do, we aim to do together.'

A local authority lead for social enterprise comes to a similar conclusion, seeing the strength and resilience of local communities being grown from the growing intersectionality of individual's lives. They observe that for many people there is no longer a false dichotomy between the so called religious or secular parts of their identities. 'I think at a local level, there will be those connections made just purely through individuals that are involved in different organisation – you can be on the board of the social enterprise you can be part of a particular church, mosque or temple, you could work within the council… you could be all those things. There are all those individual links coming together, and all that knowledge is fitting together with the local.'

The second set of reflections represent what might be called the strategic view of development, in which the gains in understanding and experience of effective partnership and collaboration learned during the pandemic need to be consolidated at a formal policy level. One local authority leader for example reports they are exploring how best to move forward their pandemic-response systems of communication and participation onto a more permanent footing. 'During the pandemic we set up weekly community hubs meetings between the council team, and all the different voluntary sector partners. We met weekly to look at all the practical stuff, but also the developmental things of what we're doing. We all came to a position where actually, this way of working has been a real positive way of working. One of the councillors is actually leading on a plan of how we work together going forward.'

Another reflection from a local authority source contributed via the survey proposes a large-scale programme of funding to grow the capacity of faith groups so that they can fulfil the increased demands potentially expected of them from policy thinking. 'Fundamentally, more funding is needed to continue to support, encourage and grow the relationships between faith, civil society and the wider community. Faith plays a hugely important part in thousands of residents' lives, governing their social constructs, habits, interactions and morals. If we want to keep engaging with faith organisations in a wider and more productive way, we must be able to support growth in their infrastructure, social value projects, leadership, inclusion and in the models and mechanisms that exist to nurture support e.g. Faith Forums.'

We leave the final words from the analysis of the interview data to the reflections of a local authority lead in a rural authority.

Their powerful metaphor not only encompasses technical and resource implications. It also suggests the shifts in mindset and approach that might be required if the new civic space that has opened up is to be sustained. Will collaboration be allowed to criss-cross freely across a more porous policy terrain or will future projects be re-inscribed with borders and barriers which reinstate hierarchies and notions of expertise? 'We realised that no one organisation could get us out of it. Not one part of the system could help turn the tidal wave of needs. We needed to work together, and in order to be able to work together, we realised we'd have to pull down the fences and build bridges. Whether they'll blow out the bridges and put back up fences is yet to be seen.'

Gathering the strands

This analysis of the data has highlighted key commonalities, but also differences between local authorities and faith groups in their experience and understanding of the policy implications arising from the extraordinary period of human history we are living through. Both sides agree that the experience of the pandemic has galvanised relationships, making explicit the existing models of faith based social care and social justice engagement in often exciting and more accessible ways. There is widespread recognition that both institutions need to change; to become more agile, flexible and innovative in the context of growing demand but also reduced resources. Interviewees from across the board agree that the necessary and rapid shift to online ways of working have brought unexpected benefits which need to be unpacked and explored further.

However, there is a minority of voices, some quite vociferous, who warn against an uncritical and headlong rush into this 'new normal'. Voices from both sides articulate some cynicism and suspicion; unconvinced that a lurking secularism within local authorities has been sufficiently eradicated to allow a more open public space to emerge or a wilful desire on the part of faith groups to play by their own rulebook has been sufficiently expunged to allow proper issues of safety and wellbeing to be addressed. It will be important going forward into potential new spaces of co-production to pay attention to what these voices are saying about power and critique, and to make sure that a diversity of views and perspectives – both supportive and questioning – is held in a positive and mature tension. That in itself will be a sign that a successful transition to a policy framework characterised by egalitarianism and mutual respect has been achieved.

7
Headlines and Key Findings

Headlines

- 60% of local authorities who participated in this research involved food banks operated by a faith group or faith-based organisation as part of their response to the pandemic;
- 67% of local authorities report that there has been an increase in partnership working with faith groups since the start of the pandemic;
- Partnership has grown most since the start of the pandemic in relation to food poverty (up from 66% of local authorities before COVID-19 to 78% now) and mental health and wellbeing (up from 43% to 48% now);
- 91% of local authorities describe their experience of partnership with faith groups as 'Very Positive' or 'Positive';
- 93% of local authorities in our survey consider wider sharing of best practice in co-production between faith groups and local authorities to be 'Very Important' or 'Important';
- The most diverse local authority areas are also the most likely to see their faith communities as open and inclusive, rather than closed and conditional;
- 76% of local authorities expect that new partnerships undertaken with faith groups during the pandemic will continue afterwards. 47% of them want these partnerships to continue on a changed basis after the pandemic;
- Future priorities are focused on deeper co-production of goods and services, rooted in named shared values and a shift from 'authority' to 'enabler'; and
- Faith groups are pioneering inclusive digitally based outreach to communities that could help local authorities address wider issues of inclusion, participation and belonging for the most isolated, vulnerable and socially marginalised.

Across the data, we see a desire and commitment to understand and explore further the more honest and authentic *relationship building* that has already occurred, but needs to continue if innovation and hope are to be accessed for future challenges.

In both sources of data, we have seen a renewed appreciation and understanding of the wealth and necessity of the *resources and innovation* faith groups have brought to the pandemic response, and the way this has led to a commitment to share insights and innovation from both sides.

Finally, we have seen how in both sources of data, a desire and commitment has been expressed to move from a passive service-mediation model of faith-based engagement to a more active co-production model. On this reading, what we have called the *strategic* element of partnership, future visions for improvement, and the strategies required to fulfil them will feature more fully and intentionally the insights and expertise of faith communities.

The ten key findings from this research can be summarised as follows:

1. The research has uncovered an overwhelming endorsement and appreciation of faith-based social engagement in response to the pandemic;
2. The research has generated a new framework for understanding the shifts in partnership between local authorities and faith groups. It suggests that what characterises these partnerships is the interplay between deepening *relationships*, a willingness to share *resources and innovation* and a commitment to co-developing a more inclusive framework for considering *future strategy*;
3. The nature of this engagement has been primarily in directly meeting emergency need in the areas of food poverty, and those experiencing shielding and self-isolation, and mental health and wellbeing. As well as distributing food, faith groups have also distributed information to vulnerable groups and acted as a signpost for other goods and services offered by local authorities;
4. The ability of faith groups to do this is often based on long-term presence in the community and being a key member and facilitator of pre-existing relationships and networks;
5. We expect this type of work to carry on, but also anticipate increases in other areas of partnership between local authorities in such areas as homelessness, debt counselling, and education as we move from the health crisis phase to the prolonged recovery phases of the pandemic;
6. Evidence of anxieties about working with faith groups highlighted in reports published twenty years ago (such as proselytization, socially conservative, lack of gender participation) are now largely reduced. Does this represent some kind of major shift in mindset?;
7. A space designated as 'the new normal' has opened up under the exigencies of the pandemic. Could this now be a permanent space of trust, collaboration and innovation that has implications for the way that both sectors work?;
8. New digital spaces of interaction and co-ordination have emerged that lead to flatter hierarchies and more inclusive tables with higher levels of diversity and participation;
9. This observation is substantiated by a clear commitment to develop partnership working in new ways in the future. This implies a shift from softer forms of partnership in the form of delivery, co-ordination and dissemination of information, to also include more innovative and intentional forms of strategic co-production; and
10. This shift will require strategic resourcing, a new leadership mindset and active support of localised grassroots initiatives that reach across traditional barriers. Can the 'new normal' be fashioned into a permanent and transformative adjustment rather than simply a quick fix?

Resourcing Change – suggestions for sustaining 'A New Normal'

The data from this report highlight how the early phases of the pandemic acted to accelerate otherwise slow and uneven processes of partnership between local authorities and faith groups towards more open and transparent processes of consultation, co-production and partnership. The unambiguous expression by local authorities in favour of deeper and more collaborative approaches to partnership in the future, combined with proposals from the *Levelling Up* report – which sees a 'New Deal' with faith communities as one of its four central pillars – opens up a new policy space that arguably has not existed since before the creation of the Welfare State 75 years ago. At certain points in the data, participants have framed this approach as 'the new normal'.

The creation of a universal and comprehensive welfare state after the Second World War had strongly Christian origins as defined by Archbishop William Temple, who not only coined the term 'welfare state', but traced the broad policy contours on which it would be constructed in his book *Christianity and Social Order*, published in 1942. However, this religious foundation has by and large been forgotten, and the dominant narrative surrounding the origins and purpose of the Welfare State is instead a secular, scientific and technocratic one – a perspective that still appears in many policy frameworks today. This new policy space that is opening however offers unparalleled opportunities for faith groups to be seen unapologetically for who they are – i.e. communities of *faith*. That faith-based identity, for so long occluded, denied, or described only in proxy terms such as culture or ethnicity, can now be allowed to express itself in fully authentic and creative ways.

However, the way in which this faith is communicated has to be mature, enabling and deeply respectful of all expressions of faith – both those of other faith communities, as well as the beliefs, values and worldviews (Baker and Power, 2018) of those who define themselves as being of no religion (i.e. not affiliated to any religious tradition). Entering the new policy space will require faith groups to retain a deep sense of criticality; preserving their identity and sense of public purpose and mission, as well as holding to account areas of government or local government policy that go against principles of social justice and human and environmental flourishing. It may also require them to invest their own resources in equipping both their own leaderships and members to respond strategically (in resource and training terms), practically (as key local hubs and providers of resilience and sustainability) and theologically (in reflecting on these times of immense change through the lens of faith, and the alternatives that a religious or faith perspective always provides).

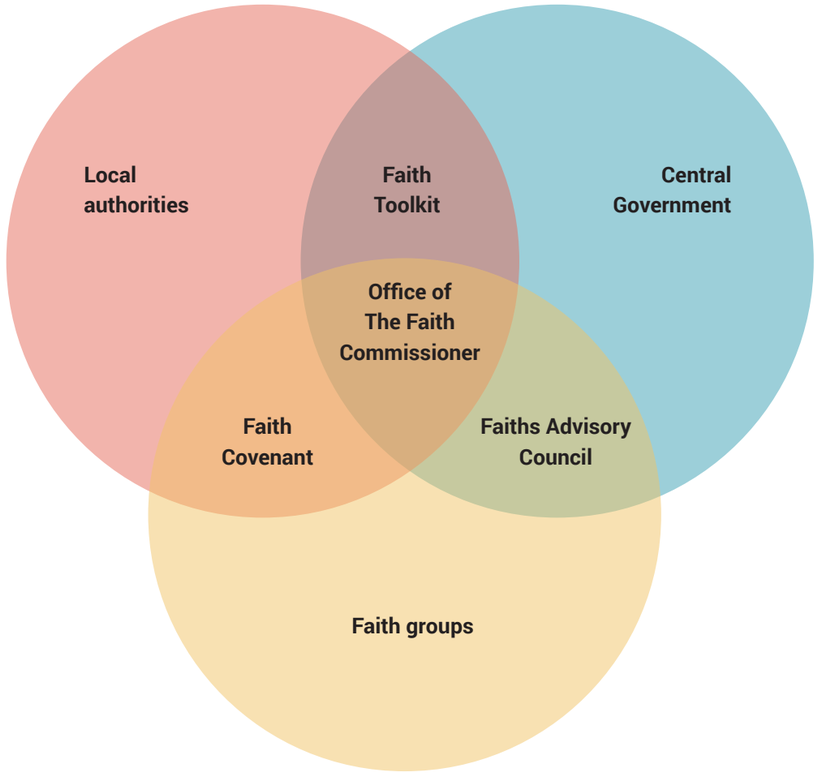
As well as throwing up new challenges and opportunities for the faith sector, this new policy space invites new challenges and opportunities for local government. These reflect the new willingness and capacity, beginning to be evidenced by this research, to see religion and belief not as something alien or different, but rather as something already present and deeply rooted; common, ubiquitous and integral to both individual and community life. Neither is belief uniquely religious – beliefs, values and worldviews of one kind or another shape and motivate the ways we all act in the public sphere. They also shape and animate our institutions and structures of governance, even when we think we need to suppress them and convince ourselves they have been suppressed.

Policy Recommendations

If this more open, collaborative engagement between faith groups and local authorities is to be sustained and developed, national and local policy makers need to act to ensure that the conditions for effective collaboration are maintained. Specifically, our findings suggest that measures will need to be taken to:

- Sustain and grow opportunities for **relationship building** between faith groups and faith-based organisations and local authorities, including using digital technologies;
- Increase opportunities for **sharing learning and best practice** both amongst faith groups and local authority staff regarding partnership working between faith groups and local authorities; and
- Foster contexts in which faith groups and faith-based organisations, together with other civil society groups, can participate in **strategic planning**.

This report recommends appointing a **Faiths Commissioner** to promote and champion faith groups. The Faiths Commissioner's status would be similar to that of the Children's Commissioner for England. The Office of the Faiths Commissioner would be a non-departmental body but appointed by a Government department, such as the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government.



This appointment could underpin the development of the following initiatives that would strengthen relationships between local authorities and faith groups, provide opportunities for learning and development, and support better informed strategic planning:

1. **Encourage the nationwide widespread adoption of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society's Faith Covenant.**

   This agreement provides important protections for faith groups and local authorities alike, as well as a framework that reflects some of the shared values and understandings needed to foster trust and effective partnership.

2. **A toolkit – drawing on the Faith Covenant – should be developed by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society and distributed to each local authority in the UK.**

   It would include examples of best practice in partnerships between faith groups and local authorities and aim to build an understanding of what works well. The toolkit would also identify ways of recognising and sustaining the positive impacts provided by the use of digital technologies.

3. **Establish a new "Faiths Advisory Council" for liaison between faith groups and central Government**.

   The new "Faiths Advisory Council" would look strategically at ways for faith groups to contribute to improvements in a post-COVID-19 Britain. It would be chaired by the Faiths Commissioner, who would be able to work across all Government departments. Meetings would be attended by appropriate Ministers and senior civil servants. Until 2012, the Faith Communities Consultative Council (previously the Inner Cities Religious Council, established in 1992) met to discuss issues relating to cohesion, integration, neighbourhood renewal, and social inclusion. Its agenda, however, was too narrow and it sat too deeply within the then Department for Communities and Local Government. This new body would develop more effective ways for faiths, other civil society groups and Government to engage in strategic planning.

Acknowledgements

This work was undertaken by the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society and was supported by funding from the Sir Halley Stewart Trust and The Trussell Trust. The views expressed within this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Trust. The researchers and Steering Group would like to offer their deep thanks for all from local authorities across the UK who provided data and insights via the survey, as well as those individuals across local authorities, faith groups and faith-based organisations, who shared their time, experience and knowledge in interviews.

Research Personnel

Lead Researcher and Lead Author

Professor Chris Baker, William Temple Professor of Religion and Public Life, Goldsmiths University of London, Co-Director of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit (FCSU), Goldsmiths, University of London

Research Advisor

Professor Adam Dinham, Professor of Faith and Public Policy and Director of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit (FCSU), Goldsmiths University of London

Researchers

Matthew Barber, William Temple Foundation Scholar, Goldsmiths, University of London.

Val Barron, William Temple Foundation Scholar, Goldsmiths, University of London.

Greg Smith, Associate Research Fellow, William Temple Foundation.

Andy Turner, Goldsmiths, University of London.

Steering Group

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, Chair APPG on Faith and Society.

David Barclay, Partner, Good Faith Partnership.

Dr Heather Buckingham, Head of Church Engagement, The Trussell Trust.

Alasdair Gordon, Office Manager, Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP.

References

Awan, I. (2012) '"I Am a Muslim Not An Extremist": how the Prevent Strategy has constructed a "suspect" community', *Politics and Policy*, vol 40, no 6, pp 1158 – 1185.

Baker, C., Crisp, B., and Dinham, A. (eds.) (2018) *Re-imagining Religion and Belief: 21st century policy and practice*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Baker, C. and Power, M. (2018) 'Ghosts in the Machine - beliefs, values and worldviews in the workplace and business environment', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, vol 39, no 4, pp 474-489.

Baker, C and Skinner, H. (2006) *Faith in Action: the dynamic connection between spiritual and religious capital*, Manchester: William Temple Foundation.

Cloke, P., May, J., and Williams, A. (2017) 'The geographies of food banks in the meantime', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol 41, no 6, pp 703-726.

CULF (Commission on Urban Life and Faith) (2006) *Faithful Cities: a call for celebration, vision and justice*, London: Church House Publishing/Methodist Publishing House.

Dinham, A, Furbey, R. and Lowndes, V. (eds.) (2009) *Faith in the Public Realm: controversies, policies and practices*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Dinham, A and Francis, M. (eds.) (2015) *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Farnell, R., Furbey, R., Shams Al-Haqq Hills, S., Macey, R. and Smith, S. (2003) *Faith in urban regeneration*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

New Economics Foundation and Church Urban Fund (2001) *Faiths, Hope and Participation -celebrating faith groups' role in neighbourhood renewal*. London: NEF/CUF

O'Toole, T. DeHanas, D. and Modood, T. (2012) 'Balancing tolerance, security and Muslim engagement in the United Kingdom: the impact of the 'Prevent' agenda', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol 5, no 3, pp 373 – 389.

Temple, W. (1976) *Christianity and Social Order*, London: Shepheard-Walwyn/SPCK.

For a copy of the survey, interview questions and list of participating local authorities in the interviews please visit gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/current-projects

Sir Halley Stewart Trust