



FAITH GROUPS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Notes for Councillors on engaging with faiths

East of England Faiths Council
June 2012

Foreword

Churches, religious charities and other faith based groups have a hugely important role to play in supporting the disadvantaged in our local communities. It is quite right that local authorities should work with them as effectively as possible; and I wholeheartedly commend this simple and practical guide.

Baroness Hanham, Department for Communities and Local Government

Introduction

Governments of all complexions have recognised the value of involving faith groups in democratic processes, and the social benefits that arise from opportunities for faith and public sector to appreciate, understand and challenge one another.

The East of England Faiths Council (EEFC) is one of a number of bodies working to promote such co-operation, and is supported in this by Local Authorities and faith leaders. This document, based on research and experience in the field, is intended to be useful to Councillors who may want to engage with faith groups in their locality and beyond. It considers possible reasons for doing so; the likely benefits; and the practicalities of engagement.

In 2009, EEFC undertook a study for Inspire East, *Research into the role of faith communities and empowerment in the East of England*. Key findings were:

- the value of elected members, as well as officers, in providing a point of contact and facilitating relationships between faith groups and Local Authorities.
- the importance of individuals of faith in providing bridges.
- the recognition of faith as an integral part of the community.

Building on these observations, EEFC subsequently undertook its own research, *Survey of Councillors and Faith Groups in the East of England, 2012*, and found that the large majority of respondents (although it must be borne in mind that these were self-selecting) were keen to engage with faith groups in their ward or division and help them increase their involvement with civic society. They also saw a range of specific benefits from increased contact.

A small number of respondents to this survey did express concern at the possibility of the voice of faith being in some way privileged over other voices. The process of facilitating dialogue as undertaken by the EEFC is intended to broaden, not reduce democratic involvement, especially given that many faith groups put themselves at the service of more marginalised sections of society, and so opening channels of communication for the so-called 'hard to reach'.

Points of interaction

There are a number of reasons why Councillors may wish to locate, talk to or work with faith groups in their ward or division. For example:

- To take into account their knowledge of local issues, needs, interests and networks
- To consult on likely effects of new or past policies
- To ensure that faith resources are mapped into plans such as emergency capability, community projects, volunteer schemes
- To encourage and support community use of faith premises; and public buildings for third sector use
- To discuss current and potential delivery of services
- To consult on plans for new housing and how faith groups can help create sustainable communities
- To offer Local Authority resources to assist local inter faith groups
- To help faith groups find modest funding to assist and endorse their projects

Benefits

The foremost beneficiary of good communication between Councillors and faiths is the local community they both serve. The more fully faiths are involved in providing information and helping to implement plans, the more they can contribute to the success of projects and to the sense of community. This in turn helps faith groups meet their own need and desire to be of service and act as a good neighbour, and assists elected members to improve community wellbeing and solve individual problems. This creates better environment for the Local Authority to fulfil its functions effectively. Equally, this work becomes more problematic if some faith groups remain excluded from participation.

There are further benefits for some Councillors, to which a number of respondents alluded in the EEFC research: they feel themselves supported by the prayers and support of their own and other faith groups as they make decisions which, although practical in nature, will have a profound effect on the lives of others and are underpinned by ethical considerations.

Locating faith groups

Councillors normally know their own ward or division very well, will be aware of most of the faiths represented there (whether or not they have a formal place of worship) and will probably be in contact with leaders or ministers. However, this is not always the case, perhaps because some faith groups have recently formed, are small, or remain 'below the radar' as they have no formal premises. The demographic details given to new members may not include faith groups. Another point stressed in our research was the heavy time pressure on elected members, constraining them in finding groups and making contact.

The great majority of faith groups can be located:

- Through the local inter faith organisation (LIFO) if one exists
- From lists and Asset Registers held by the Council's Community Liaison Team
- By searching FaithsBase on the EEFC's' www.faithneteast.org.uk web site
- Through the local CVS
- Through county SACREs (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education)
- By using existing faith contacts, especially Church of England ministers, prison chaplains, town pastors, police chaplains, hospital chaplains etc.

Engaging with faith groups

Some people with a different religion or none, may have reservations about initial contact with a faith group unfamiliar to them, fearing inadvertently giving offence or being misunderstood. This concern is usually unnecessary, the tact and goodwill you would use in contacting any group for the first time should be sufficient to avoid problems. However, if in doubt, consult first on any 'difficult' points with a member of that faith who is a Council officer, or ask the faith representatives whom you are meeting for their advice in advance e.g. dress code, timing of visit, what both sides expect from the meeting. EEFC's publication, *Working and Consulting with Faith Communities*, will be a useful starting point and source of information.

Similarly, faith groups vary in their knowledge about how local government works. There can be useful mutual learning, and you may wish to suggest to them the EEFC publication *Working together: Faith Groups and Government. A brief guide to essential information and resources, 2012.*

If you find you wish to further increase your understanding of other faiths' beliefs and practices, there are a number of organisations providing education, some located in this region. However, it is better not to enter into a training course with the sole or prime aim of avoiding giving offence, as in any meaningful encounter, particularly those that lead to trust and friendship, each side has to 'risk' some element of giving and taking offence in order to build understanding.

Inter Faith Groups

There are 25 or so Local Inter Faith organisations (LIFOs) in the East of England. Some have been established for more than 30 years, some are just in the process of forming. There are various reasons why such a group might come together; these are explored in EEFC's publications *Local Interfaith Activity in the East of England, 2008* and *Local Inter Faith Organisations Survey, 2011.*

If there is a LIFO active in your area, it will be a good source of information and can act as a prime contact. If there is not, you might consider suggesting to faith representatives with whom you are in touch, that one is set up. LIFOs can come into being more quickly, and generally more effectively, if assisted by their Local Authority with, for example, making contacts, provision of meeting space, and initial administration. However it is essential that the LIFO maintain its independence and autonomy from any public sector body.

Anyone considering setting up a LIFO can get as much assistance from the EEFC as they wish, from advice on governance to training to individual networking. The Inter Faith Network for the UK is also an invaluable source of information.

Conclusion

Councillors who took part in EEFC's 2012 survey said, for example, 'More is achieved by working together and sharing local intelligence'; 'Local Government could benefit from improved communications with faith groups' and 'Better involvement and support...create a more integrated community'.

We hope this brief document will be of use to elected members as they serve their community.

Resources

Contacts:

EEFC (The East of England Faiths Council) Tel: 01223 421606

Email: eefc@cambcatalyst.co.uk Web: <http://www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk/>

EELGA (East of England Local Government Association) Tel: 01284 728 151

Email: info@eelga.gov.uk Web: <http://www.eelga.gov.uk/>

IFNetUK (The Inter Faith Network for the UK) Tel: 020 7730 0410

Email: ifnet@interfaith.org.uk Web: <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/>

Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education: In the East of England there are 10 SACREs, each relating to a County Council or Unitary Authority, from whom you can obtain the contact details for the Clerk.

EEFC publications and proceedings of events are available as downloadable pdfs from <http://www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk/reports.php> and <http://www.faithneteast.org.uk/publ.htm>

Also follow us on Twitter @eefaithscouncil

Events and training opportunities:

in the East of England can be found at:

<http://www.faithneteast.org.uk/events.htm>

FaithsBase, <http://www.faithneteast.org.uk/faithsb.htm>, a database of 2,000 faith communities across the region which can be searched by location, organisation and faith tradition and contains contact details. However, since May 2011, due to a reduction in funding, EEFC can no longer accept new entries, neither are we able to maintain the database on a consistent basis, so if using this facility, please check on the information elsewhere to confirm its current status.

Sources of training:

SIFRE (the Suffolk Interfaith Resource) seeks to advance public knowledge and understanding of the teachings, beliefs, traditions and practices of the different religions and philosophies. <http://www.sifre.org.uk/>

St Ethelburga's Centre for reconciliation and peace

St Ethelburga's is based in London. <http://stethelburgas.org/>

The East of England Faiths Council is considering organising networking meetings for Councillors interested in faith engagement; if you would like to participate in such meetings, please contact us as above.