



## **EAST OF ENGLAND FAITHS COUNCIL**

### **SURVEY OF COUNCILLORS AND FAITH GROUPS IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND**

**East of England Faiths Council  
January 2012**

# **SURVEY OF COUNCILLORS AND FAITH GROUPS**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the course of its work, the East of England Faiths Council (EEFC), has been advised by Councillors that they themselves practise a faith, adhere to a belief system, or are interested in engaging with faith groups. Research conducted by the EEFC [Role of Faith Communities and Empowerment in the East of England; 2009] indicated that faith groups may find it easier and/or more effective to interact with their Local Authority through elected members rather than just through officers.

EEFC therefore conducted the survey described in this report, in conjunction with the East of England Local Government Association (EELGA), with two purposes:

First, to discern the level of interest that Councillors, and particularly those who consider themselves to have a faith or belief may have in helping faith communities become more involved in civic life.

Second, to help identify practical steps that could be implemented by EEFC, EELGA and Local Authorities to support councillors in working with faith groups, should a sufficient number wish to.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

EEFC drafted a questionnaire, which was amended and approved by a small reference group of serving Councillors, and officers from EELGA and Local Authorities. This was sent as a SurveyMonkey link in an email on 19 October to the Leaders and Democratic Services Managers of all 52 Local Authorities, asking them to cascade the participation request to all their Members, with a closing date of 18 November 2011.

There are roughly 1900-2100 councillors across the 52 authorities in the East of England but exact numbers depend on how you count them as quite a few are 'double-hatted' in District and County Councils. It is therefore not possible to give the number of those responding as a percentage of a potential total.

The survey was fully completed by 101 of 140 respondents (72.1%). The remaining 39 gave partial responses, and where they have answered a question, their answer has been counted.

Although the majority of respondents considered themselves to be of faith, a significant minority did not, but nevertheless completed the questionnaire.

### 3. GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF RESPONDERS

130 of the responders gave their Local Authority affiliation. The spread across the 11 strategic authorities is as follows:

<b>Bedfordshire</b>	
Bedford Borough Council	5 (3.8%)
Central Bedfordshire Council	0
Luton Borough Council	0
<b>Cambridgeshire</b>	18 (13.9%)
Peterborough City Council	8 (6.2%)
<b>Essex</b>	24 (18.5%)
Southend on Sea Borough Council	0
Thurrock Council	5 (3.8%)
<b>Hertfordshire</b>	26 (20.0%)
<b>Norfolk</b>	16 (12.3%)
<b>Suffolk</b>	28 (21.5%)

### 4. RESPONSES

**Question 1** (137 responded)

*Do you consider yourself to be an adherent or follower of a particular faith?*

Yes 66.4% (91)

No 33.6% (46) with one response '*But Christian background*' and another '*Maybe I would have put yes in brackets, because I have been quite active at times in my local parish church*'

(Those answering 'no' were encouraged to continue the survey if they wished.)

If yes, which? (75 responses)

Christian		
(denomination not given)	42.6%	(32)
Christian (Anglican)	36.0%	(27)
Christian (Roman Catholic)	13.3%	(10)
Christian (Baptist)	1.3%	(1)
Christian (Methodist)	1.3%	(1)
Christian (URC)	1.3%	(1)
Quaker	1.3%	(1)
Judaism	1.3%	(1)
Islam	1.3%	(1)

Note: there were 16 people who considered themselves to have a faith, but did not state which.

**Question 2** (97 responded)

*Do you consider yourself to be a member of this faith*

Culturally	22.7%	(22)
Through religious practice or personal devotion	33.0%	(32)
Both?	44.3%	(43)

**Question 3** (103 responded)

*Would you be interested in engaging with faith groups in your constituency to advise and assist them in involvement in civic society?*

Yes 85.4% (88)  
No 14.6% (15)

"I already do this by direct communication and financial support through my County Council discretionary budget"

**Question 4** (82 responded)

*In what ways (if any) do you feel faith groups could benefit from improved communication with, and insight into local government?*

All answers are listed in full at Appendix A. There were 82 responses, but some included more than one comment, so the total number of comments analysed is 101. Although the question was worded as above, a number of respondents noted benefits to the public sector, which are listed below.

Broadly speaking, these responses fell into the following categories.

Benefits to faith groups

Faith groups would understand more about local issues; what role they could play; how they could be more effective. **12 comments**

"Achieving more by working together and sharing local intelligence"

Faith groups would benefit from having more practical information about how Local Authorities work; about how decisions are taken. **10 comments**

Would help faith groups to speak out on local issues; be more politically involved; lobby; extend democracy. **7 comments**

Increased engagement from faith groups would help them to reduce prejudice/bigotry, and become part of their wider community. **5 comments**

Faith groups often interact with vulnerable people, and should know how to signpost them to services. **4 comments**

Faith groups may find it easier to get funding for their social work. **2 comments**

Benefits to Local Authorities

"Actually I think it is the other way round – Local Government could benefit from improved communications with faith groups"

Faith groups have assets; can provide services; run community facilities; be innovative in meeting need. **10 comments**

Faith groups have good knowledge of local needs and priorities; can share local intelligence. *7 comments*

“Faith groups have an important role of influencing Councillors and the Mayor and to inform the Council of the priorities for the community. There is a 2-way communication that provides a richness for the benefit of the community”

Improved cohesion/peace/harmony; decreased tension. *5 comments*

Increased community engagement; better communities. *4 comments*

Improved consultation; decision-making; joint planning. *4 comments*

Faith groups bring important values (e.g. justice, peace, fairness); remind Local Authorities of importance of values. *3 comments*

“The Government has tried to replace faith based values in society and this has become known as political correctness. People need a value system on which to make judgments. The faith communities provide this”

Faith contributes to new housing developments. *3 comments*

Councillors can increase their spiritual insight. *2 comments*

Other comments on this question

Need for improved two-way communication; clear channels of communication; good personal links. *14 comments*

“More joint meetings”

“Developing Big society and partnership working”

Faith groups have an important role to play in the Big Society. *3 comments*

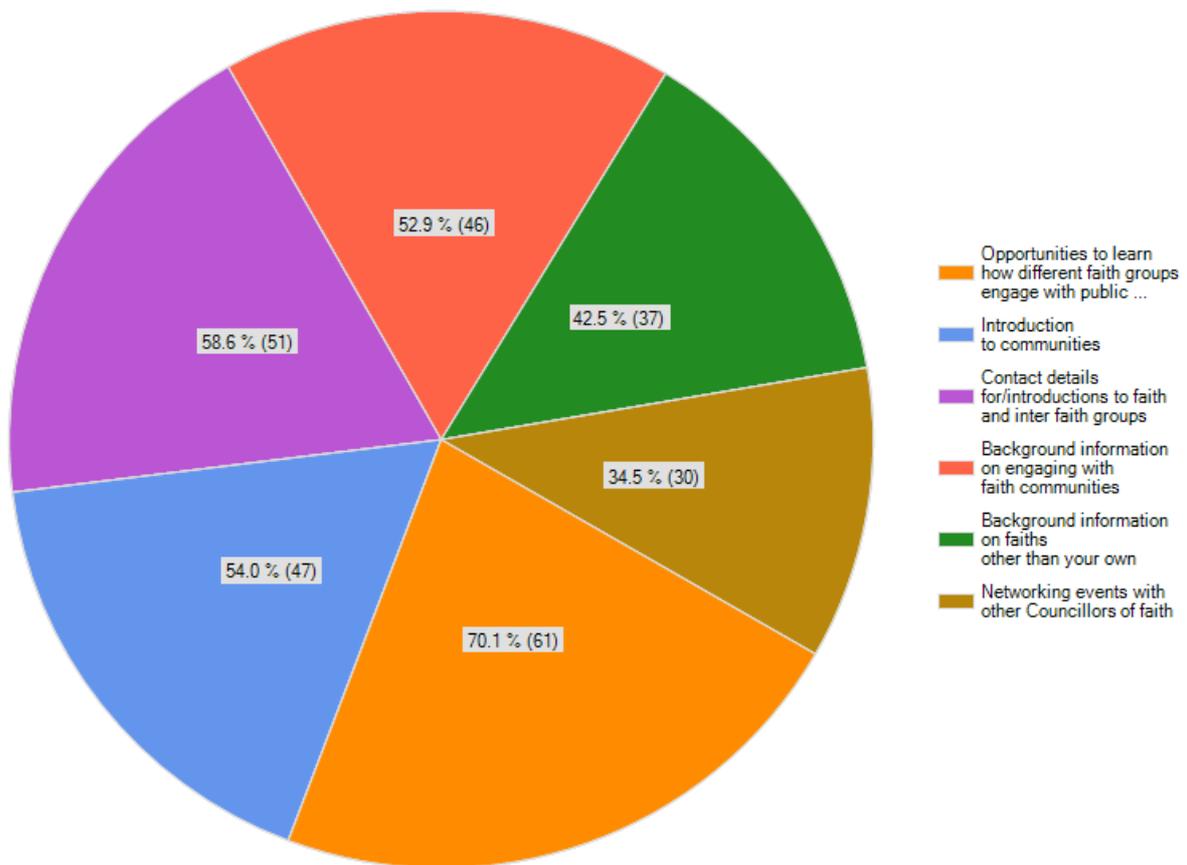
Faith groups should not be treated differently to any others/should not be privileged. *3 comments*

“By understanding that politics is a secular activity and that a person’s religious views are a separate subject. Politicians should treat all religions equally”

Some Councillors already had strong links with faith groups. *3 comments*

**Question 5** (87 responded)

*What support would you need as a Councillor to provide advice and assistance to faith communities?*



Note: respondents could choose more than one answer, so percentages total more than 100.

There is a general desire (61 respondents) to understand more about the process of engagement between faith and public sector. Introductions to (presumably followed by contact with) faith and inter faith groups would be helpful to 96 respondents. Background information on how to engage with faith groups (46 respondents) and on other faiths (37 respondents) would also be helpful to the majority. Networking events were less popular, but 30 people (34.5% answering this question) would like to have this opportunity.

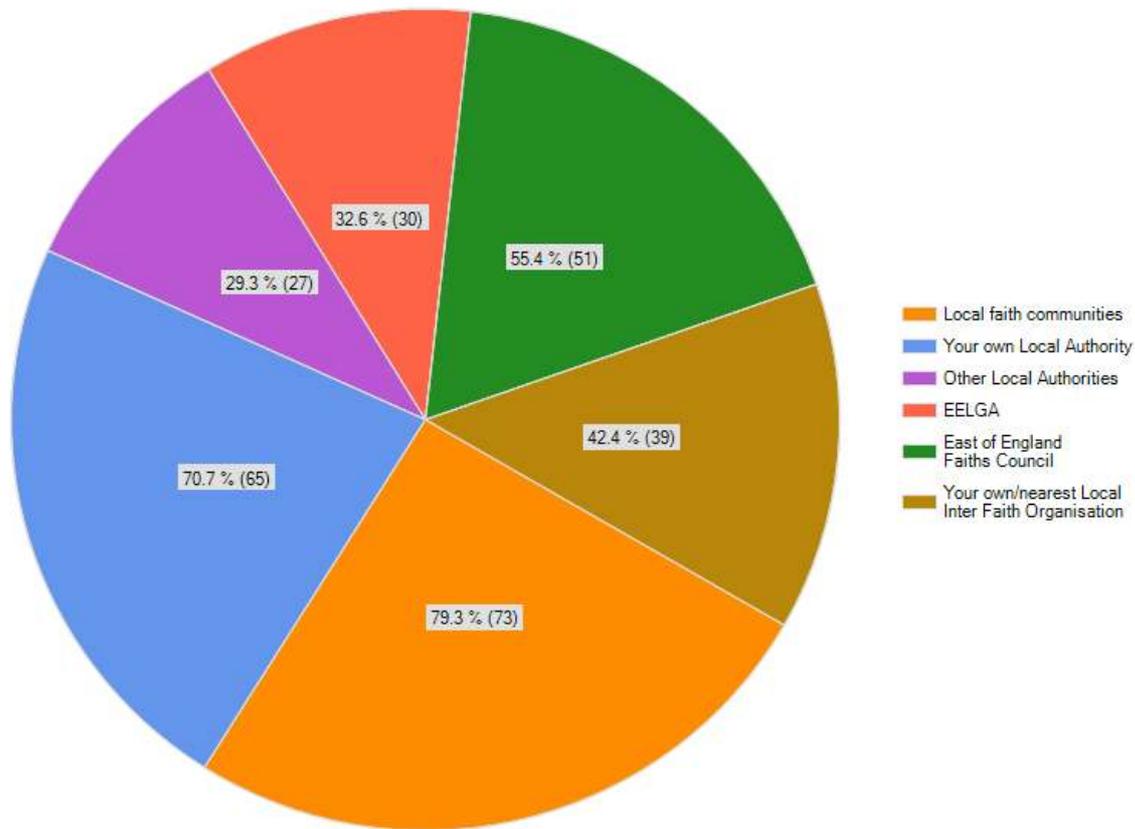
“Reductions in ‘them and us’ attitudes through better direct information, friendship and engagement”

“I just don’t have time to get involved in anything else”

As can be seen from the 11 specific comments given in response to this question (see Appendix B) the main reasons given for not requiring support are the fact that the respondent is already engaging, or lack of time.

**Question 6** (92 responded)

*From which organisations would you be happy to receive such information and support?*



Local faith communities	79.3%	(73)
Your own Local Authority	70.7%	(65)
Other Local Authorities	29.3%	(27)
EELGA	32.6%	(30)
East of England Faiths Council	55.4%	(51)
Your own/nearest Local Inter Faith Organisation	42.4%	(39)
Other suggestions:		
All of these		
None		
National Groups		

The majority of respondents would welcome more support in engaging with their faith communities, and many would accept support and information from more than one source.

There was a preference for obtaining such support from the respondent's own local faith communities or Local Authority (over 70% in each case), or from the EEFC (over 50%).

"Too many people have only a hazy knowledge of the things for which local government has responsibility. The members of faith groups could benefit if there were a readily accessible route of communication from their group to the local council"

**Question 7** (86 responded)

*If you are a person of faith, would you be interested in joining a network of other Councillors of faith?*

Yes	39.5%	(34)
No	60.5%	(52)

If so, would you prefer this to be:

Restricted to your own Local Authority	28.6%	(10)
Restricted to your own County Council	25.7%	(9)
Region-wide	45.7%	(16)

**Question 8** (21 responded)

***Please feel free to add any information or comments here***

The 21 respondents to this question gave a wide range of comments (listed in full at Appendix C). As with Question 5, time constraints were again mentioned as a limiting factor (four), and as in Question 4, some respondents commented that faith should be kept separate from public life (six).

"I believe that the council as a whole should remain secular"

**5. MAIN OBSERVATIONS**

1. A large majority (85.4%) of those who completed the questionnaire said that they would be interested in engaging with faith groups in their constituency to advise and assist them in involvement in civic society.

Most respondents saw a range of specific benefits from increased contact, good communication and better understanding between faith communities and Local Authorities. These benefits were both practical and conceptual, and were perceived as accruing to faith communities, Local Authorities and the wider community.

2. Respondents wanted to widen their understanding of how the faith and public sectors can engage together. Interaction with faith and inter faith groups was the most popular way of doing this, but background information on how to encounter faiths was also in demand.

3. Respondents were also open to getting support from a variety of sources in order to be able to give assistance to faith communities. There was a preference for obtaining such support from the respondent's own local faith communities or Local Authority (over 70% in each case), or from the EEFC (over 50%).

4. Being a Councillor is a voluntary role, and it is clear that availability of time is an important limiting factor.

"I am interested in things like meeting faith communities but just don't have time to get more involved"

5. There was less interest in networking with other Councillors of faith (39.5%, 34 people). It is not possible to know whether this level would be reflected across all non-responding Councillors. If it were, there would be a large number who in theory would take up such a facility if it were offered, but the only way to discover this would be to make the offer.

6. There are some reservations on the part of a small number of respondents about the concept of promoting faith interests over other interests (which EEFC does not in any case advocate).

"I am not so interested in any particular sector of the community, I am more committed to everyone without consideration to religion or creed"

"Lobby Government to encourage Local Government to engage with and support their community religious groups, and keep them updated of council news"

The great majority of respondents did not express concern about faith involvement in civic life, but saw it as a benefit. Arguably, this result could arise from 'self selection'; those with an interest in faith chose to respond. However, the questionnaire was specifically open to all, so that

any Councillor wishing to express the views that faith should be kept private and separate was free to do so, and six did.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM OBSERVATIONS

1. *A large majority (85.4%) of those who completed the questionnaire said that they would be interested in engaging with faith groups in their constituency to advise and assist them in involvement in civic society.*

There is a clear interest and potential need to be met here, and EEFC should take a lead in suggesting and organizing such provision although not making all provision itself, which it does not have capacity to do.

"This is a long overdue requirement in this region and should be part of a new Councillors Induction"

2. *Respondents wanted to widen their understanding of how the faith and public sectors can engage together. Interaction with faith and inter faith groups was the most popular way of doing this, but background information on how to encounter faiths was also in demand.*

There is an issue about locating local faith communities in order to give their details to Councillors. EEFC developed FaithsBase, a publicly available database held on its FaithNetEast web site, to meet needs such as this. However, since EEFC lost all its regional and national funding in early 2011, it has been unable to proactively update this, making FaithsBase a less reliable and complete source of information. Usually the best way for a Councillor to locate faith groups in his/her constituency is through officers of the Local Authority and through a Local Inter Faith Organisation (LIFO), if one exists. Councillors should not underestimate the importance of LIFOs as faith groups find membership of these is valuable in promoting their engagement in civic life (see EEFC publication 'Faith Communities and Empowerment in the East of England').

"Better involvement and support to create a more integrated community"

3. *Respondents were also open to getting support from a variety of sources in order to be able to give assistance to faith communities. There was a preference for obtaining such support from the respondent's own local faith communities or Local Authority (over 70% in each case), of from the EEFC (over 50%).*

As above: there is an issue about providing good, up to date information about the location of all faith communities. EEFC is, and needs to continue working with those Local Authorities that are funding it, to be able to provide this information.

4. *Being a Councillor is a voluntary role, and it is clear that availability of time is a limiting factor.*

Any support offered must be time-effective e.g. written material sent to Councillors must be short, and information it holds easily accessible. EEFC can write such information, but needs to be advised by EELGA as to how best to disseminate it.

5. *There was less interest in networking with other Councillors of faith (39.5%, 34 people). It is not possible to know whether this level would be reflected across all non-responding Councillors. If it were, there would be a large number who in theory would take up such a facility if it were offered, but the only way to discover this would be to make the offer.*

EEFC should contact the 34 respondents and ascertain a few simple parameters: would they attend a meeting held before end of June 2012; how far would they be willing to travel? EEFC could work with EELGA and/or one or two of the County Councils funding it to hold a meeting and ascertain whether these should continue.

“Local Government support voluntary groups within their area. I do not understand why such support is not offered to local faith groups”

6. *There are some reservations on the part of a small number of respondents about the concept of promoting faith interests over other interests (which EEFC does not advocate).*

This difference must be made clear in all interactions, and all support must be equally available to all Elected Members.

“This is a timely and much needed initiative – thank you”

## 7. ACTIONS

- EEFC/EELGA to write a short, signposting guide (to include a reminder that the EEFC publication *Working and Consulting with Faith Communities* is available), to be cascaded to all Councillors.
- The guide to include an offer of helping locate local faith communities if this is specifically requested by a Councillor; EEFC will need to do this with the relevant Local Authority.
- The guide to include list of all LIFOs, and a reminder that EEFC can assist LIFOs in getting established (although local faith groups themselves must instigate them).
- Acknowledgement and thanks to be sent to all participating Councillors before end of January, if possible with a copy of the final report.
- EEFC to contact the 34 respondents interested in networking and proceed as per recommendation above.

## **APPENDIX A – all responses to Question 4**

*In what ways (if any) do you feel faith groups could benefit from improved communication with, and insight into local government?*

- Most actually seem pretty well plugged in especially through the Multi-Faith Forum but sometimes need help with practical details of planning, local government procedures etc.
- an opportunity to share information
- I think actually it is the reverse. That Local government and local parties could benefit from more involvement with faith groups as a way of increasing community engagement.
- Become better informed about local issues and solutions
- Engagement with local events, engagement with local forums, SNAP etc putting on local events, celebrations knowledge of local developments
- Through their general interest in peace and justice issues, applying principles locally
- Be consulted on various activities in the authority but also know what the authority is doing for different nationalities.
- More joint meetings
- Understanding how councils work so they can engage effectively
- I don't believe that faith groups should be treated as a special case, ahead of other individuals or groups.
- Better communication and increased engagement is always beneficial
- We seem to have a very good mixture of faiths in our council and each council meeting we have a person from all the different faiths come to pray with us and it is an insight to all of us
- Some prejudicial views/bigotry amongst faith members might possibly be eradicated/ lessened
- Understanding of how things work in a culture that may not be instinctive to them.
- Help people understand the working of councils
- Knowledge of who does what in Local Authorities
- In many ways
- I think that the more people understand the community and the faiths they follow, the easier it is for people to live in peace and harmony with each other.
- Faith groups have an important role of influencing Councillors and the Mayor and to inform the Council of the priorities for the community. There is a 2 way communication that provides a richness for the benefit of the community.
- The same way that ALL groups should be - by personal links with all levels of government
- Achieving more by working together and sharing local intelligence
- Faith communities will increasingly be called upon to engage with society as councils do less and fund less. Faith communities also have a responsibility to speak out on a range of social issues and need to be informed to do so.

- By associating themselves more proactively with local bodies and pressure groups and by keeping abreast of local issues. Commenting on local issues (through a press officer) from a faith perspective would also help.
- Planning issues for places of worship, assistance available either from council or partners.
- People who care are often keen to be involved in their community
- Inviting guest speakers from Local Government or have a faith forum in order to discuss local issues and ways in which faith groups and local government can work together.
- They would be more effective
- If they share plans that will benefit the wider community, as well as their followers
- Mutual encouragement to improve communities
- Developing Big Society and partnership working
- Reduction of or prevention of tension or mistrust. Help with the planning of facilities and community based services
- There are shared agendas under both localism and big society plus a common interest in social care.
- Understand that we all live under the same set of laws.
- Pray for us and what we are doing. Get involved in political process. Improve understanding of local needs.
- Firstly within our District faith groups are already engaged - several receive funding for projects in the community/youth projects. These services could continue to be developed: for instance preventative care with elderly residents, street pastor schemes, befriending services.
- Improved decision making. Links that help practically (eg environment, planning, tourism)
- General communication can only be of benefit to both sides
- Improve understanding
- More understanding
- Yes
- I already do this by direct communication and financial support through my County Council discretionary budget
- Coordination of charity work - encouraging social inclusion
- Faith Groups are key part of local communities and are an excellent vehicle to deliver services particularly as local government seeks to divest services. They know their local communities and should be a valued partner
- Don't know
- It will depend upon what they perceive as relevant areas
- Via 'whole' community engagement
- Better understanding of what local government can do and help/be helped in
- Actually I think it is the other way round - Local Government could benefit from improved communications with Faith groups
- Explicit involvement of faith groups in planning to facilitate the creation of community centres in new developments. Conversation at the earliest possible

stage about decisions being made which would affect the ability of e.g. parishes to serve the needs of new local populations - especially new housing developments. 2. Advice to churches and other groups on how they can take a lead in enabling the transfer of existing community centres to community ownership; best practices models. 3. Local government could benefit from the innovative, creative work which is often done by faith communities in youth work, Care of the elderly etc.

- Faith groups have a great deal to offer the community by providing support to residents, working with young people, and maintaining the fabric of society.
- Talking to someone who listens to them and then with respect discusses the reasons how decisions are arrived at .Encouraging attendance at meetings to listen to debates. Officers often just voices or a name on a screen or paper. Involve in Civic Events by invitation etc.
- They could be more aware of social issues and have input into engagement with residents.
- Lots of ways
- Lobby Government to encourage Local Government to engage with and support their community religious groups, and keep them updated of council news.
- They should be helped to understand, that the Council is faith blind as far as decisions
- Too many people have only a hazy knowledge of the things for which local government has responsibility. The members of faith groups could benefit if there were a readily accessible route of communication from their group to the local council.
- By understanding that politics is a secular activity and that a person's religious views are a separate subject. Politicians should treat all religions equally.
- They would hopefully feel part of the wider local community, not just their particular faith community.
- Local and National government should understand the role that faith groups do especially in the social services they provide.
- Better communications
- Improved communication can assist in greater understanding between groups and help to integrate them in to the local community. With insight in to local government it can raise awareness of and help access services available.
- Greater understanding of needs of wider local community
- More knowledge always useful
- I and my ward colleagues already keep in contact with local groups and are always open to hearing from any group with the local communities interest at heart their faith in this respect is does not concern me.
- Better involvement and support to create a more integrated community.
- Making sure "Democracy" is supported, that your vote is important to the preservation of the right to speak and worship your own particular 'God'.
- In the development of Social Care community groups to support each other in sickness, old age and need
- Understand the challenges facing councils, respond realistically, input to policy, Big Society opportunities, list is endless

- Certainly in civic help, voluntary work, elderly groups and youth. Also in defining priorities for councils
- Mutual help and experience
- The opposite: I prefer to see a very clear separate of all levels of government and religion(s)
- As a member of the Conservative Christian Fellowship and my Christian Practice, I find this helps me with my everyday Constituency work and understanding of peoples needs
- Translation of modern pressures to spiritual teaching
- Reductions in 'them and us' attitudes through better direct information, friendship and engagement
- The Government has tried to replace faith based values in society and this has become known as political correctness. People need a value system on which to make judgments. The faith communities provide this.
- Many vulnerable people attend Church, either regularly or at difficult times in their lives and faith groups need to know how to signpost them to appropriate services. Also many faith groups provide important services within their communities that Council officers may not be aware of, and may need help with funding and where to go to get financial or governance support for these groups
- By consultation on local policy & strategy, partnership support within our local communities,
- More invitations to their meetings encourages good debate and helps to point the community in the right direction for gaining information as to what is going on in their area.
- Bringing about more understanding of the diversity within the community and through this assist in bringing about more community cohesion
- I think there is a role for faith groups in everyday life. Faith groups can play a role in areas where the council is reducing its services such as youth work.
- Understanding of problems in tough economic times
- Improve communication and identify social need. Learn the grant support streams.

## **APPENDIX B – all responses to Question 5**

*What support would you need as a Councillor to provide advice and assistance to faith communities?*

- I am interested in things like meeting faith communities but just don't have time to get more involved
- I have a great amount of respect for Islam, having lived in Turkey for two years, and I often find it difficult to deal with the attitude towards Muslims often shown by professing Christians.
- I already do a considerable amount
- None - already do
- My working role is within third sector management so I already have experience of working with a myriad of faith groups.
- Most of the above Councillors in North Herts have.

- I provide the same assistance to everyone. If that doesn't fit in with their faith, ask someone else.
- If asked by the faith groups in my ward, I would respond positively to any request they make. I believe that Faith groups should be considered by Government and local Government as an important part of the community and recognise that they result in a positive influence to the local community who engage in their faith. Local Government support voluntary groups within their area. I do not understand why such support is not offered to local faith groups.
- None
- Time
- Emphasis must be in faith groups to be proactive

## **APPENDIX C – all responses to Question 8**

***Please feel free to add any information or comments here***

- There is a wide range of different faith groups. Some will have nothing to do with local politics or affairs and are very inward looking (eg J W). Some do not feel a sense of belonging to the local community and don't understand that they 'can' contribute and 'can' take part in local politics and community engagement activities.
- I just don't have time to get involved in anything else.
- There are opportunities for all individuals and groups to engage with civic life and council decision making, and should take these up if they wish to do so. My council work is very demanding (as a 'part time' vocation) and I do not have time to make a special effort to engage with one section of the community.
- I often have difficulty reconciling opinions voiced by practising believers with notions of equality and human rights.
- I would prefer to engage with other individuals without the hindrance of any 'faith' labels.
- Within all areas of Councillor working there has to be a time balance and whilst I would be prepared to work with all faiths to encourage greater cohesion of the good work done by faiths within our community my time is already stretched!
- Already aware many co-parish councillors are Catholic. No district councillors, other than my husband are, to my knowledge
- Many of us are already connected with other Christian councillors through our political parties, and have existing links with faith groups.
- I would like to have seen a networking opportunity to bring various faiths together so they may work more collaboratively. I also feel that when working with faith groups they should be open to deliver outcomes for partner organisations. For instance - if a faith group is working with young people whereas I can appreciate that faith groups may choose not to provide sexual health advice (on faith grounds) themselves they should be willing to provide young people information on services that can offer support. However, I feel there is huge scope for faith groups to provide community support services such as 'fall prevention' advice which can enhance existing services.
- Time constraints would make further involvement difficult.
- This is a timely and much needed initiative - thank you

- Re 8 or 9 I might be interested but am not prepared to commit myself until I know what is likely to be involved and the likely mutual benefits for the councillors and communities
- I see some who claim to have faith making decisions that must be contrary to any faith. This makes me very glad I have no faith.
- This is a long overdue requirement in this region and should be part of a new Councillors Induction.
- I believe that the council as a whole should remain secular
- All gods are mythical.
- Sorry this survey is lost on me - and don't see where it is heading .
- I am a church warden and Council portfolio holder - time is very precious I meet neighbours through Parish Council, Women's institute and Quilting - I have set up and organise a weekly cafe for all age groups in the Bethel Baptist Chapel - we get 50-60 of all ages.
- Most of the above suggest that I should benefit by learning about faith and faith groups, which I certainly would. I'm very interested in helping such groups to understand the procedures and challenges and opportunities of Local Government
- I am willing to talk with local members of both the Church and Methodist groups in the Village which I do on a regular basis.
- I am not so interested in any particular sector of the community, I am more committed to everyone without consideration to religion or creed. If a particular sector wishes to know or put forward their interest in their Local Authority, then it is at that stage I would wish to engage, explain and assist in their understanding, but not because they are a religious sector, but that they are engaging as an interested party wishing to discover benefits to their society.