



Working together: faith groups and government A brief guide to essential information and resources

January 2012

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INTRODUCTION

When faith groups and government have the opportunity to appreciate, understand and challenge each other, and to work together and separately, there are practical social benefits. And yet – historically – this relationship has not always been an easy one. It has often been marked by misunderstandings and miscommunication, although recent years have seen an improvement in levels of mutual understanding, and much more interest in cooperation.

People in faith groups are, of course, often well aware of the broad outlines of governance in the UK – the law and representative democracy – but they may not know which public authorities control what, or whom to contact, or when. They may find themselves and officials talking in jargon and confusing language, planning to different timescales or using the same words with different meanings.

This guidance aims to help by briefly explaining key points about the nature of government systems, and giving some basic information and signposting. Although written for faith groups, many secular groups may find it useful.

Faith groups may wish to communicate with government – local or national – for a number of reasons, for example:

- To make their views known, either in response to a specific issue or consultation, or to point out to government an issue of which it is not currently aware
- To seek government support, perhaps funding, for something they want to do for the common good
- To get advice from people in government on their plans or concerns
- To encourage their members to be involved in something government-led, for example as volunteers
- To offer the resources of the faith group, for example their premises as an emergency centre
- To help their members gain access to government services
- To get government approval for something that requires it, such as planning permission for new premises
- To bid to provide services commissioned by government
- To co-operate on a joint project.

What follows is a brief introduction to the different kinds of public authority in the UK, including their structures and duties. Particular reference is made to authorities in the East of England, including how to make contact, and identify resources and information for finding out more.

LOCAL COUNCILS

Most local faith groups will deal with local councils far more often than with any other part of government. Councils, which are also known as local authorities, have responsibilities for a wide range of services and duties.

Structure

People often find it confusing when there is more than one council covering their area. This is common in many places where there is a 'two-tier system' of both a county council and a district or borough council (although where parish or town councils also exist, it is actually often three-tier).

Most of Eastern England has a two-tier structure. The first tier is the county council, which has a broad range of responsibilities across a whole county. Below the county is a second tier of smaller areas, known as districts or boroughs, each with its own council. London differs from the other two-tier areas in that the 32 boroughs have greater powers than an ordinary district or borough council, with some responsibilities being held by the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority.

Some councils are called 'unitary councils' or 'metropolitan districts'. These have all the powers and responsibilities of a local authority under one roof – although some responsibilities may still rest with parish or town councils.

County Councils and Unitary Councils in East of England

<i>Counties:</i>	<i>Unitaries:</i>
<i>Essex Cambridgeshire Hertfordshire Norfolk Suffolk</i>	<i>Peterborough Luton Southend-on-Sea Thurrock Bedford Borough Central Bedfordshire</i>

Main duties

The table below shows how the duties and responsibilities of local authorities fall to different types of councils. But some activities – including many that may be of particular relevance to faith groups – are common to all types of local council. These include civic leadership, maintenance of public spaces and community centres, heritage and arts, economic regeneration, and grant funding and support for local voluntary and community organisations.

County Council	District Council	Parish and Town Councils
Social services (adults and children) Libraries Youth services Education (schools and adult community learning) Passenger transport and roads Waste management Strategic planning	Local planning Housing Leisure services Refuse collection Licensing Crematoria	Allotments Burial grounds Community centres and recreation grounds Footpaths Public toilets

People

Councils are political organisations, which means that responsibility for decision making rests with councillors (who are also known as elected members). These are politicians elected usually every four years, and who set the strategic direction of the council. Every member represents a particular local area, called a 'division' or 'ward', and usually a political party. Within most councils, the largest political party will form an Executive, comprising a Leader and Cabinet. Cabinet Members have responsibility for particular areas of the council, such as Adult Social Care or Economic Regeneration, and normally they will all be members of the majority political party. A small number of councils operate on a different system, known as the committee system.

Whilst elected members are responsible for democratic decision-making, responsibility for the day-to-day work of the council rests with paid employees, sometimes known as officers. This includes senior managers, such as the Chief Executive and Directors, as well as professionals who may have community-facing roles, such as social workers, and other officers who work behind the scenes, for example providing professional services to schools.

If you wish to contact someone in your local council, there's no strict rule as to whether you should contact councillors or officers first – it depends on the reason for your contact. Generally, if it concerns a local matter, such as a problem relating to a community centre, or a suggestion about a service that might be needed, you can contact your local councillor who may respond and then pass it on to a relevant officer. Similarly, if your enquiry concerns an issue relating to a particular area of the work of the council, such as provision of Social Services, you can also contact the Cabinet Member.

If the purpose of your contact is technical (such as a planning enquiry about current or new premises) or related to a particular council service (such as guidelines for crematoria) then it is best to contact the council officers directly. Details of how to do this can normally be found on the council's website, or in the phone book or at your local library. Often the council will operate a call centre with a single telephone number that can deal with enquiries direct, so you can ask for the correct department.

Many councils also employ officers whose job it is to liaise with the public and special interest groups. These officers – sometimes called public engagement or community liaison officers – will often be well known in the communities they serve and can be a useful point of help and relationship-building for faith groups.

You can also contact a councillor if you feel unhappy with the way that your approach to the council has been dealt with.

OTHER LOCAL BODIES

Other government organisations that may be relevant to faith groups within their local area include NHS Trusts, Police, Fire and Rescue, Prison and Probation Services.

The NHS

The structure of the NHS is undergoing significant change, although at the time of writing, responsibility for health care is generally divided between 'commissioning' trusts (such as primary care trusts, or PCTs) and 'provider' trusts such as acute or foundation trusts.

Local health services, such as GPs (family doctors), dentists and community nursing are normally the responsibility of Primary Care Trusts. Hospitals are normally the responsibility of local Foundation or Acute Trusts. Ambulance services are provided by Ambulance Trusts, and mental health services by Mental Health Trusts. In the future, PCTs may largely disappear and responsibility for commissioning local health services will transfer to GPs, to be called Clinical Commissioning Groups.

There are potentially many reasons why faith groups may wish to liaise with, or influence, health authorities. Finding who to talk to may be difficult, but a good place to start is the NHS website www.nhs.uk. There are also Local Involvement Networks or LINKs in every locality, which act as a bridge between health authorities and the public. Visit the LINK pages on the NHS website above, and you can search for a LINK near you. LINKs are due to be phased out by 2013, to be replaced by a new organisation in each local authority area known as HealthWatch.

The Police

Police are organised in large geographical units, but these vary from quite small counties (such as Cambridgeshire) to large counties or even regions like West Midlands. The Metropolitan Police cover some areas that are not otherwise part of London.

Central government lays down certain rules and standards for police all over the country, but local responsibility for each force rests with a Police Authority, which sets a budget and broad direction, and appoints the Chief Constable. However, it does not intervene in "operational matters". This may change, with the current Government proposing elected Police Commissioners.

If you want to raise something with the police, generally start with the officer who has direct responsibility, and only go up the command chain if you are unhappy with the response. If the matter you're concerned about involves more than one agency – fly-tipping or disorderly behaviour, for example – talking to local councillors may make sense as they can bridge gaps and generally have good access to local police.

Many forces also have community liaison officers, whose job is to work with community groups. Faith groups may well want to make contact with their local community liaison officer, so each knows the other and builds a good relationship. You can locate this person by visiting your Constabulary's website, and searching for the names of your police team under 'My Neighbourhood' or similar. Alternatively, call the main switchboard for these details.

Fire and Rescue

Fire and Rescue Services are organised mainly on a county basis. They are often regarded as unbiased bridges and peacemakers on local partnership groups, and can therefore be useful contacts. The role of this service now includes much more preventative work (fire safety education and youth work in areas where arson is a problem, for example). In rural areas, their premises may also be important community meeting-places. Like the police, fire services also often use community liaison officers to reach out into local communities.

Prison and Probation Service

Although the Prison and the Probation Service have very little direct impact on most people, faith groups may well be involved through schemes that aim to stop people committing crimes (whether they are ex-offenders or merely people thought to be likely to commit crimes), schemes that are alternatives to prison ('diversion from custody schemes') which include attempts to make reoffending less likely, or involvement in prisons (chaplains, education, advice to prisoners, campaigning on treatment of prisoners, for example). Locate your local prison, or offender management service, by going to the website www.justice.gov.uk where you will find a Probation and Prisons Map.

Chaplaincy

Most public bodies, in particular hospitals, prisons and emergency services, have a chaplaincy, which may be single or multi faith. This can be a very helpful route into the organisation for a faith group, as the chaplain(s) will be able to advise on its structure and the right people to contact. They may be in a position to make introductions or give other information.

NATIONAL BODIES

The UK is a constitutional monarchy. The Queen does not make the decisions, but her 'Royal Assent' is required for all new legislation, and as Monarch, she is part of Parliament.

Parliament comprises the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Commons is made up of Members of Parliament (MPs) who are elected at least once every five years and who represent particular localities, known as constituencies, as well as political parties. The Lords are predominantly politically appointed. The House of Commons can overrule the House of Lords, but individual MPs are constrained by party discipline.

Parliament makes and passes laws, holds the Government to account, and raises key issues; it is based in Westminster. The Government is made up of Ministers, who are MPs or Peers chosen by the Prime Minister; it is based in Whitehall.

The Government should have the support of a majority of MPs in the House of Commons. A government that cannot command the confidence of the House of Commons will fall. If the political balance in the House of Commons changes after an election, we expect the Government to change. However, once that Government is in place, they control the majority of time in the House of Commons, and party discipline nearly always encourages the majority of MPs to vote for the government line.

The House of Commons

If you wish to raise an issue relating to national government, you should always start with your local MP. If it is a matter confined to one constituency, such as a planning matter, no other MP will be able to consider or discuss it. See below for how to locate your MP.

However, if you wish to write on a matter crossing constituency boundaries or, say, on behalf of a faith group across the whole of Norfolk, you could contact more than one MP. You can also contact 'All Party Parliamentary Groups' (APPGs) if there is one relevant to your matter; there are many APPGs, with interests ranging from Asthma to Youth Affairs. Details of APPGs can be found on the national websites given below.

Select Committees are set up to scrutinise specific areas of government, and you can engage with these by submitting evidence to them. Details of all Select Committees, along with current enquiries and all relevant contact details, can be found on the Parliament website. Guidance on submitting evidence can also be found here. MPs can raise issues through debates, 'Early Day Motions', and petitions presented to the House of Commons.

Although MPs' main role is about national governance and legislation, it is worth telling your MP about a major local campaign or issue affecting his or her constituency, as the intervention of an MP is taken seriously by local authorities.

The House of Lords

Some members of the Lords (also known as Peers) do belong to a political party group, but others do not. The House of Lords tends to be a less political environment than the House of Commons. In lobbying for something, it is wise not to forget them.

Peers do not have constituencies, although they do have particular areas of responsibility, either as a member of the Government or for their party, or because they were appointed due to their expertise in a certain area. There are a lot of faith and inter faith groups in Parliament. Find out whom to contact by using the parliamentary website Register of Interests, or the website called *They Work for You* (see below). Whether or not the Peer you approach agrees with you, they will value the information you send.

Do not send the same information to all the MPs or Peers, only to a targeted group. If you send to all of them, each will think someone else is dealing with the matter. Also bear in mind that very few Peers have secretarial or administrative support, so you may need to be patient, and make it easy for them to work with you.

The Civil Service

The role of the Civil Service is to advise and inform the Government, and to execute Government decisions. Civil servants are non-political, and carry out the will of the elected Government irrespective of any personal political views they may hold. You can contact them for information, and also supply them with information to be passed on to Ministers. Each government department has its own website, and these list senior civil servants and their areas of duty. You will deal with civil servants if, for example, a Minister wishes to visit a project you are running.

Whilst the core of the Civil Service is based in Whitehall, London, some departments also have branches regionally and locally. Local branches of JobCentre Plus, for example, may be a useful point of contact for faith groups concerned with the welfare and benefit system.

RESOURCES

There is a single website for all kinds of government information and activities called DirectGov: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/index.htm>. If you don't know where to look, this is the best starting-point. From here you should be able to find written, telephone and e-mail contact details.

Local government

Councils in the East of England all have their own websites. Some have nominated officers who can act as a first point of contact for faith groups, but you can also go straight to the department you need, e.g. planning.

Websites for County and Unitary Authorities are:

Cambridgeshire: <http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/>

Bedford Borough: <http://www.bedford.gov.uk/>

Central Bedfordshire: <http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/>

Essex: <http://essex.gov.uk/>

Hertfordshire: <http://www.hertsdirect.org/>

Luton: <http://www.luton.gov.uk/>

Norfolk: <http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/>

Peterborough: <http://www.peterborough.gov.uk/>

Southend: <http://www.southend.gov.uk/>

Suffolk: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/>

Thurrock: <http://www.thurrock.gov.uk/>

There are 41 other Local Authorities in the East of England, mainly Borough, City and District Councils. Each has its own website, and detailed information for departments can also usually be found in the telephone directory.

Police, Fire and Rescue and NHS Trusts, as well as district and borough councils, all have their own websites, and detailed listings in the Yellow Pages.

National bodies

The website www.theyworkforyou.com has a wide range of information on MPs, Lords, parliamentary debate and groups.

The main website for Parliament has a search function for you to find your own MP and link to his/her website: www.parliament.uk. Contact the House of Commons on 020 7219 4272 Hcinfo@parliament.uk and the House of Lords on 020 7219 3107 Hlinfo@parliament.uk

Parliamentary Outreach provides a very good service of information, talks and visits. Find their details and events on the website above, or for a contact in the East of England email Sharon Stanley, stanleysh@parliament.uk or call her on 07917 488842.

They have recently produced 'A Guide to Campaigning at Westminster'. This can be found at: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-information-office/Brief-Guides/Outreach-Publications/Campaigning-at-Westminster.pdf>

Other resources

Faith and inter faith groups in the region can contact the East of England Faiths Council (EEFC) for advice on working with government; email eefc@cambcatalyst.co.uk, call 01223 421606 or visit www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk.

The website www.faithneteast.org.uk has up to date information on events, guidance and downloadable publications from EEFC. There are a number of EEFC guides directly relevant to contact with public bodies, e.g. 'Working and Consulting with Faith Communities' and 'Building for Faith', a planning guide for faith groups.

If you are trying to make a case, a few helpful statistics can go a long way.

The Office for National Statistics website

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DI1/Directorries/DG_10012143

gives you access to various sets of statistics, that you can "interrogate" to gather very specific statistics, for example, the number of unemployed people in their fifties who have lived in a particular area for less than ten years. The statistics can also be used to make predictions based on existing profiles and trends.