

Structure and Membership of Local Inter Faith Bodies: Points to Consider

East of England Faiths Council, June 2011

Introduction

From time to time, the East of England Faiths Council is asked by local inter faith bodies about how they should make decisions on their organisational framework and patterns of membership. While we cannot give formal advice or guidance on this, because it is essentially a matter for local decision by each group, we hope that this background information and suggestions of some points to consider may prove useful.

There is no detailed template prescribed, but there is certainly some background reading that would prove very useful before you make any decision, and this is listed below.

Background information

Much of the information you need can be found on the website of the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN): <http://www.interfaith.org.uk>.

In particular, you can read or download the Local Inter Faith Guide <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/localguide.htm>.

The criteria for IFN membership of local inter faith organisations are:

Local inter faith organisations may apply to join the Network if they:

- (i) have been in existence for at least two years;
- (ii) are formally structured with an agreed constitution*;
- (iii) if multilateral, are genuinely 'multi-faith' in participation and 'ownership', with representation on the governing committee from the main faiths in the area;
- (iv) if bilateral or trilateral, reflect the genuine participation, ownership and representation in the governing committee from the faiths concerned;
- (v) are directed, like the Network, primarily at relationships between mainstream religious groups; and have a regular programme of activities.

*A 'constitution' indicates documentation which covers terms of reference and operation including: the aims of the organisation, membership arrangements; procedures for meetings, rights and duties of members; the method of electing or otherwise choosing a management committee and its duties; finance arrangements, including subscriptions and accounts; processes for the appointment of any office bearers such as Chair and Secretary; procedures for constitutional amendment. The level of detail of this documentation varies considerably from body to body (and IFN can supply samples of different kinds).

Advice on charitable registration and other matters relating to charity law in England and Wales is available from the Charity Commission:

www.charitycommission.gov.uk

Choosing your organisational framework

The first and guiding decision will be your choice of Aims or Objects, that is, what you are setting yourselves up to do, and how formal or informal you want the organisation to be. For example, consider whether your Objects will or may involve you in fundraising; in delivering a service; or in nominating representatives to be on public bodies. Chapter 6 of *The Local Inter Faith Guide* gives excellent background on these issues.

The most informal option is to become an unincorporated association, which enables you to have a bank account without registering as a charity or company.

It is not essential to register as a charity if your turnover is less than £5,000 a year, but there may be good reasons to do so, for example if you are going to raise funds or seek grants. For a small organisation with a turnover below this threshold, you can use a simplified model constitution recommended by the Charities Commission.

There is also the option of becoming a Company Limited by Guarantee or (the more recently established option) of a Community Interest Company, which is more appropriate for not-for-profit businesses. This is a structure you could choose to use later if your plans warrant it, for example, if you wish to employ staff or lease property, as this gives more protection to the Trustees.

Membership

You will need to consider whether your group:

- will be open to organisations, individuals or both
- will be open to membership by any organisation/individual who agrees with your Objects, or only to those from named faith traditions;
- will have 'open' meetings to which anyone can come and/or 'closed' meetings (members only)

The Local Inter Faith Guide again has very helpful comments on the pros and cons of different choices at this stage, and examples of how various groups have reached their decisions: Chapter 9 is essential reading. Most local inter faith groups tend to start by considering the nature of the faith groups in their locality, making sure the main ones are involved, and then developing from that point. This gives them a strong and credible base.

Some of the most important considerations include:

- What is the pattern of faiths in your locality, and how will you ensure that those faiths are involved in your group?
- Are you likely to act as a representative body in relation to the public sector, e.g. your local authority?
- If you choose to have a fully open membership, are you prepared to accept that the presence of some groups may deter the presence of other ones, possibly more mainstream?
- If you choose to limit membership in any way, how will you make and explain the decision you reach on this?

It is worth noting that:

- You can if you wish differentiate between membership and admission to meetings, possibly with the latter being more open than the former
- You can also choose to limit the faith communities from which members can come
- If you are registering as a charity, the Charities Act demands you demonstrate 'public benefit': this may mean that you need to involve key faiths in your area, depending on your objectives. The Charities Commission publishes detailed guidance on 'public benefit'
- Some religions or denominations give guidance as to what other faith groups their members should formally engage with.

Some local inter faith groups define their membership by naming specific religious traditions. It is important to be consistent in the descriptions you use.

However, the Equalities Act 2010 may affect some of your decisions. Look on IFN's website for the Equalities Act Briefing Notes, in particular paragraphs 12 to 18. There are exemptions from the Act for inter faith bodies whose objects make it clear that they are dealing with relations between particular religions or beliefs.

There have not been any cases in which the relevant provisions in the Act have been interpreted by a Court in relation to local inter faith group membership, so it is not possible to give firm guidance on this matter yet.

In conclusion: Decisions about organisational framework and membership need to be made locally by the founders of an inter faith group. Our advice would be to keep it as straightforward and clear as possible.

The East of England Faiths Council is most grateful to the Inter Faith Network for the UK for some of the information supplied.