



EAST OF ENGLAND FAITHS COUNCIL

**STUDY OF LOCAL INTER FAITH ACTIVITY
IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND**

December 2008

This study was funded by Communities and Local Government
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1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge with gratitude all the local inter faith bodies who took the time to meet the research team, and gave freely of their experience and knowledge. Without them this report would not have been possible.

Particular thanks are also due to the Inter Faith Network for the UK, whose innovative work strengthens both local and national inter faith presence, and whose assistance with this piece of work has been invaluable; the Suffolk inter Faith Resource for the material and leads it gave us; and Communities and Local Government for funding the study.

2. INTRODUCTION

In July 2008, Communities and Local Government (CLG) launched the findings of its consultation on inter faith strategy, *Face to Face and Side by Side*, which emphasised the importance of inter faith and faith-based work to the well being of society.

As part of its programme of support for increasing inter faith dialogue and action across England, CLG funded the East of England Faiths Council (EEFC) to undertake preliminary research into, and a survey of local inter faith work and organisations (see footnote). These organisations and their main activities are listed comprehensively in the Inter Faith Network for the UK's Directory, so the study was able to take this information as a starting point and build on it in terms of exploring further aspects of the groups' work and presence.

The intention was to help provide a foundation for planning and prioritisation by EEFC, as it develops its three-year strategy, which will be complementary to national and local work. The support and networking of local inter faith organisations is one area identified by the report in which regional faiths forums may be able to make a valuable contribution.

It should be said at this point that EEFC did not, and does not envisage in any way trying to direct or duplicate the excellent work being undertaken at local level, but to learn from it, help others to do so, and support it in ways that are genuinely useful to all concerned.

Footnote:

Local interfaith organisations may be:

- *a multi-faith sounding board*
- *a dialogue and discussion group for inter faith issues*
- *a group promoting cohesion and mutual civic goals*
- *a composite of several of the above*

There were three main outcomes sought from the study:

- A more comprehensive picture of local inter faith activity in the region
- Guidance for EEFC and others in supporting inter faith work in the region
- A start to identifying more opportunities for faith representation (at this stage, with Local Authorities)

These outcomes were chosen as being a useful foundation to informing increased engagement and involvement between inter faith groups and the public sector.

This study could not be triangulated with complementary studies of individual faith groups or public sector bodies, although that would undoubtedly have been useful. However, it should be noted that research into faith involvement in LSPs has already been undertaken by Churches Together in England and the Church Urban Fund, and those reports are complementary to this one.

2. OVERVIEW OF SURVEY

The intention was to discover more about current activities of local inter faith organisations; history of these bodies; future plans/aspirations; opportunities and constraints.

In all, 15 local inter faith bodies in the region were contacted (all those listed in the Inter Faith Network for the UK's Directory), and of these only one declined to give information, citing lack of time.

Additionally, information was gathered at the 'Link' meeting for the region organised by the Inter Faith Network for the UK, to whom EEFC is most grateful.

3. METHODOLOGY

The work was undertaken through a questionnaire designed to discover from each local inter faith body contacted:

- What were the original reasons for its establishment
- The type of work programmes it was running
- How these were funded
- What were its perceived needs in terms of support, information etc. and what could it share with others
- Whether it provided representatives to public sector bodies e.g. LSPs or engaged with them in other ways
- Whether such representatives had experience in, or needed support in, understanding how government works

The questionnaire was administered through semi-structured interviews, mainly face-to-face, with only three being undertaken by telephone.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 History

We sought to discover the histories of the different bodies as this gives insights to their purpose and structuring.

Two groups were over 30 years old; one was started in the 1980s; three in the 1990s; eight since 2000.

Principal reasons for starting a group were given as follows:

Inter faith dialogue	6
Community cohesion/support	6
Representation on civic structure	2

Additionally five groups cited a second reason for their formation:

Inter faith dialogue	4
Representation on civic structure	1

There was a clear split between the older groups citing inter faith dialogue as their prime reason, and later ones citing community cohesion and representation.

Two mentioned the Millennium celebrations as playing a part in their formation, and two specifically mentioned 9/11.

Two groups considered themselves to be 'in a fallow period' or 'running down a bit'. One had been formed for over 20 years, the other for only five, suggesting that age was not a factor in this matter.

4.2 Activities

These are listed at Appendix B. The overwhelming amount of activity clusters around open meetings and events, and group meetings/visits. This bears out the prime reason for the establishment of many: inter faith dialogue leading to better community relationships. Some had also produced literature designed to guide inter faith discussion, and public engagement with faiths. The most notable example here is SIFRE, which is county wide with sub-groups rather than a local body, and provides educational resources and tutors, and the *Diversity Game*, which is widely used as a training tool.

4.3 Membership

Numbers varied enormously, with some being just small groups who sometimes organised public events, through to others who had memberships of 200 (some split into categories) and mailing lists over 600. People interpreted the notion of 'membership' quite fluidly, as they were holding contact lists of people as invitees to events rather than for governance purposes. Eleven groups said they had a 'membership', and nine said they used wider databases of contacts.

Many have constitutions or Memoranda and Articles, some of which are clear on membership rules. These constitutions were not inspected, although most are submitted to the Inter Faith Network UK. However, most groups were glad to draw in as many people as possible, and cited the difficulty of securing input from minority faiths, mainly due to lack of time on their part. Several also said how hard it was to engage the interest of young people. In most groups, the majority of members were Christian, although the Baha'i faith was mentioned several times as being active, particularly given its relatively small numbers.

Insofar as representation was concerned, the majority of members were there as individuals, but some groups had provision for organisations to be members. Some had members who formally represented particular faith groups; for example, one has affiliate faith groups who appoint representatives, and another encourages its members to be endorsed by their faith group, recognising that they are speaking on their behalf. In other cases, members were seen as 'representing' a faith tradition in terms of bringing knowledge to bear and reflecting its issues.

Some respondents mentioned faith leaders (e.g. local church ministers) as being involved, but others said that key people in their local faith traditions had shown no interest. However, some faiths were providing free meeting spaces – see below in 'Funding'.

The wider membership may not be restricted to people of faith; two groups particularly mentioned that their membership included people from the public sector who had shown an interest in their work.

Insofar as having a committee or steering group is concerned, 13 had one, and one did not answer the question. Of those 13, two said it was 'really just one person'. One, as a Registered Charitable Company, had a Board of Trustee Directors.

Numbers on steering group or committee:

Up to five people	4
Five to eight people	7
Over eight people	2

4.4 Links and affiliations

Groups were asked about how they worked with other inter faith bodies; with the rest of third sector; and with public bodies. The data given are noted in Appendix A.

Inter faith bodies

There was a high level of interaction with other inter faith bodies, but usually this was just one or two who were geographically close. Also, most were in contact with the Inter Faith Network for the UK and with EEFC (borne out by a number sending delegations regularly to EEFC's quarterly meetings); and half with the East of England Faiths Agency (EEFA).

Third sector

Interaction within the third sector was patchy, primarily because few had had a specific need or opportunity. Two are members of their local VCS, and one of its county and regional VCS umbrella bodies. One is also a member of its ACRE and two of their Councils for Racial Equality. (Additionally – though not explored by this research – it should be noted that some faith groups do not see themselves as a natural part of VCS.)

Local governance

It is interesting to note that ten out of the fourteen had had contact with their local authorities. In general, this had been on specific issues, and only four provided representatives on their LSPs or other public bodies.

In one case the local inter faith group's chair is also the LSP's vice chair, and it aims to have one of its members on each of the LSPs lead partnerships. Another group is widely represented on its county, borough, police, CPS and NHS committees. Four work with their SACREs.

Nearly all respondents would welcome more contact/representation with local governance if a) there was a good reason for it (such as planning permission for a faith building), b) something would happen as a result, c) the group had people available.

4.5 Funding

A breakdown of information about funding sources is at Appendix C.

The most common source of funding is individuals (fees and donations). One generates much of its income through training and teaching activities, and others also gain some income in this way.

There is a spread amongst other sources including Local Authorities, County Councils, faith groups including Anglican Dioceses, and other voluntary organisations. In two cases, substantial support is given by a University through accommodation and facilities.

This is an indicator that there has been no common 'pot' or statutory funding source available other than FCCBF, which only three had received. In one case the experience was very positive, as the group received funding for two consecutive years, and this was key in facilitating an extensive programme of activities and events. In the other two cases, their experience with FCCBF had raised some problems in that the funding ended just as the group felt it was getting going, and in the other case the bureaucracy onerous in comparison to the value of the funding.

Donations in kind such as use of premises, or individual members funding specific activities (e.g. providing food, producing a newsletter or website) are important to survival; as is the voluntary time given. The last of these can

lead to 'exhaustion' of capacity, or too much reliance on one or two people, and this was mentioned on a number of occasions.

In terms of how funding is allocated across activities, it would seem that budgets are either not defined by the inter faith group, nor specified by the funder, with limited exceptions. However, those who received FCCBF monies had been required to prepare a full budget and breakdown, in line with the FCCBF guidelines.

4.6 Future plans and aspirations

Groups were asked how they would spend additional funding if it were available, as an indicator of their plans and needs. A breakdown of the findings is at Appendix D – note that one group did not answer this question.

Most were very clear about what additional funding might be used for – half would like to have a paid worker. Some were more specific, saying this could be someone part-time, who could help with organisation, build capacity, bid for funds, and put more formal plans and programmes in place.

Training and resources to help them improve IT and publicity, and bid for funding were seen as very important. Premises for meetings, and the cost of venues, appear to be an issue, as does lack of capacity to do more promotion/publicity. This is a vicious circle, as lack of publicity means that they are not extending their membership or the number of people willing to put in time.

Most groups want to increase their activity by broadening their range of speakers and events: there were comments about 'better speakers', 'better venues', and 'better events'.

5. LEARNING POINTS

These points are drawn from the survey interviews and also from discussion that took place at the Inter Faith Network for the UK 'Regional Link' meeting. As such, not all are directly related to individual interviews.

5.1 History

- Different social needs and emphases bring forward different types of group. It is noteworthy that although the social situation may change, those with a long history have continued to function, in some cases very energetically.
- Groups have been established with clear aims, but few have specific or measurable objectives – and there is no reason they should have. Many have grown and evolved. There is not necessarily a reason for them to change radically to meet external concerns or objectives.

5.2 Links and affiliations

- There is not enough evidence to show whether *ad hoc* or casual contact with local authorities leads to formal faith representation.
- Where an LSP specifically wishes to have faith representation, it will make efforts to secure this; in one case the first meeting of the nominating inter faith group was facilitated and paid for by the LSP Chief Partnerships Officer.
- Confidential information given by one group indicates that it is possible for a LSP to gain a faith representative who is not backed by the main inter faith group, if the Local Authority chooses someone from a smaller and less 'grassroots' body.
- In discussion, there was a feeling that Local Authorities may have attitudes to and perceptions of faith not founded on evidence.

5.3 Activities

- Some groups have more emphasis on social activities, others on learning and change, a smaller number on civic participation. There is no 'wrong' or 'right' emphasis; in fact, to try to force a change (e.g. through provision or withdrawal of funding) may be counterproductive. This suggests that if a local group is thriving, it is probably meeting a local need. If some local needs are not being met (e.g. civic representation) then there could be discussion with the group as to whether it wishes to extend its activities or help to establish a complementary group.

5.4 Funding

- In discussion, there was a general feeling that government funding 'may have inappropriate targets' or be too short term to always be as effective as it could be; this may warrant further exploration such that the benefit of public funding can be maximised.

5.5 Future plans and aspirations

- If a group wishes to go in this direction, a paid worker could help build capacity, formalise organisation, and take the burden off people (often a small number) for whom this is not a 'day job' and who may be overstretched. This argues for groups who are interested in this type of development, to seek workers who can secure grants and income. However, where paid administrative staff are concerned, a long-term approach is important.

- Training is seen as vital – for ICT, publicity, and putting in funding bids. In fact, there is such training available to the VCS, often at quite low cost. Possibly it is not sufficiently well publicised, there is no time at the disposal of volunteers to take it up, or it is seen as too general for the purposes of an inter faith group.
- An up-to-date list of topics and ‘tried and tested’ speakers would help local groups in running events.
- In discussion: the government’s recent attitude to inter faith ‘is an opportunity to empower local people’.

6. REFLECTIONS

The following are not put forward as evidenced conclusions, but as preliminary points for consideration and possible action by different groups who may be interested in this study.

6.1 For EEFC

- Research, maintain and disseminate a list of topics and speakers
- Develop guidance on the most productive way to use short-term development workers
- Publicise training opportunities - especially low-cost, VCS-oriented ones – to all inter faith groups
- Where possible, create support and training mechanisms tailored to faith and inter faith needs
- Create a database of resources to be held on FaithNetEast web site
- Provide civic literacy training

6.2 For regional governance

- Commission a review of research to help identify reasons for difficulty of involving young people and minority faiths in inter faith bodies
- Use ‘Faithlink’ to encourage interchange between local authorities and faith groups; and to advocate for faith representation on LSPs
- Consider holding sub-regional meetings of ‘Faithlink’ where they can meet members of local faith and inter faith groups

- Explore what governance bodies (e.g. LSPs, Independent Advisory Groups, Multi Agency Forums) need from faiths, such that this can be communicated back to the inter faith groups

6.3 For local inter faith bodies

- Consider whether their work has evolved, and whether current structure and remit are still appropriate
- Nominate members to participate in civic literacy training

6.4 For Communities Development Fund

- Draw up a 'Funding Advice' document that EEFC can use when responding to enquiries

6.5 For national inter faith and faith bodies

- Advise local inter faith bodies on maintaining independence while benefiting from funding opportunities
- Hold a regional workshop (jointly with EEFC) on developing structures, strategic planning, and budgetary planning

APPENDICES

Appendix A – links and affiliations

Contact with other inter faith groups

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies citing contact with the national and regional inter faith bodies listed below)

EEFC	9
Inter Faith Network for the UK	9
EEFA	7
Specific faith groups	3
None	2
Akashi	1
Grassroots	1
Other	1
Other inter faith and multi-faith groups	14

Contact with Voluntary Sector bodies

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies citing contact with the national and local categories listed below)

None	5
Other specific VGs/charities	4
BME	2
Other voluntary bureaux	2
CVS	1
Equality Advisory Forum	1
Other VS advisory bodies	1

Contact with civil governance

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies citing contact with the local public sector bodies listed below)

Local authority	10
LSP	3
None	3
Police	3
SACRE	2
Primary Care Trust	1
CLG	1

Appendix B – Activities

Meetings and events

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies organising the types of events listed below)

Local community gatherings	10
Own major events	9
Regular meetings with external speakers	6
Open meetings	6
Regular faith-based visits	6
Regular group meetings	5
Annual social events eg walk, outings	4
Events for women	3
Sports activities	3
Picnics	2
Dining	2
Young people's events	2
Occasional group meetings	2
Film showings	1
Social evenings	1

Services

(numbers of respondent local inter faith providing the types of services listed below)

Website	7
No website	6
Newsletter/literature	4
Speaking at schools	3
Training (external)	2

Appendix C – Funding

Sources of funding

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies drawing on the type of source listed below)

Individual subs	4
Individual donations	4
Local authority/county council	4
Charity donations	3
Organisation/group membership	3
Funding in kind	3
FCCBF	3
Charge for events	2
Faith groups	2
University	2
Special fundraising events	1
None	1
N/A (group v new)	1

Purpose of funds

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies indicating that their funding was restricted to one of the purposes listed below)

No special purpose	6
N/A	4
No response	2
Development workers	2
Administrative assistance	1
Public meetings	1
Educational meetings	1
Food/accommodation	1
Website	1

Appendix D – use of additional funding if it were available

(numbers of respondent local inter faith bodies indicating that they would use additional funding for a specific purpose as listed below)

Paid worker	7
Training (publicity, funding bids, IT)	6
Publicity	6
Website	5
Premises and venues	5
Pay for speakers	4
Meetings	2
Events	2
Trips	3
Special projects	2
Forward planning/work programme	2
Equipment	1
Greater engagement	1