

Ensuring a level playing field: funding faith-based organisations to provide publicly funded services

Some myths 'busted'

Faith-based bodies and religious organisations make a significant contribution to the well-being of society. They are eligible, like any other suitably qualified bodies, to be awarded a tender to deliver publicly funded services, or to be given a grant to carry out a project of benefit to the wider community or to their own members or constituency of supporters.

However, a number of myths surround the funding of faith-based bodies to deliver publicly funded services and can obstruct the fair access of such bodies to public funding and tendering opportunities as part of the third sector. Some of these myths, followed by the facts in each case, are set out below.

These notes are a positive attempt to ensure that there is a level playing field. They are addressed primarily to purchasers and funders of services in local government.

Myth 1

"We're not allowed to give public money to religious organisations."

Fact

There is no law against funding faith-based bodies, nor is there any Government policy discouraging this. Whilst it should be transparent that in most cases funds will not primarily be used to promote the specifically religious activities of the funded body, there is a difference between solely religious activity and wider faith based work for the common good. Often faith-based bodies are best placed to deliver services.

Myth 2

"Faith-based bodies don't have the necessary expertise or 'clout' to deliver services."

Fact

On the contrary, faith-based groups often have the experience, 'reach', buildings and volunteers that can enable highly effective delivery of services. Many among their number operate on a large scale and have led innovation in housing, social care and the children and family sectors to name but three.

Myth 3

"They will use public money for proselytising or worship."

Fact

Faith-based service providers will want to be honest and open about their religious convictions and/or practices and for others to recognise that their faith or religion is a prime grounding or motivation for their social action. However they understand that except where a very specific service is being procured such as the provision of religiously sensitive meals, public money is not for use for purely religious purposes. Making the provision of services conditional on the unwanted taking part in an act of worship would not be acceptable, and local authorities and other parts of government at the local level may wish to reassure themselves that such conditionality would not apply.

Myth 4

"They wouldn't want to help people they don't approve of."

Fact

The equalities legislation is clear: religious organisations providing public services are subject to the requirements of discrimination law in the same way as other organisations, save for the limited exceptions designed to ensure that a person's right to hold and manifest a religious belief is not interfered with.

Discrimination against faith-based providers in a tendering process could, however, be unlawful.

Myth 5

"Single group funding has negative implications for community cohesion."

Fact

Faith-based organisations and religious organisations can be funded to deliver services to a wide cross section of the community, such as homeless shelters, youth clubs, health and social care, health promotion or pregnancy advice and relationship counselling services.

In particular circumstances they (and other identity-, cause- or issue-focused bodies) may be funded to work primarily with their own community. It is not unlawful for a local authority to contract with an organisation to provide a service to a particular community (e.g. Kosher meals on wheels to Jewish old people), as part of service provision for the local population as a whole. Sometimes this can enhance service access to especially vulnerable groups in society.

Local authority funders may wish to encourage faith-based service providers to cooperate, where appropriate, with other faith traditions or communities with which it may have racial, social or theological differences. They will no doubt also wish to encourage the wider voluntary sector to collaborate with faith based bodies so that skills, access and resources can be pooled.

Myth 6

"Faith based groups only work with their own communities."

Fact

Many faith-based organisations are only too willing to extend the help they offer to others in the wider community. For example, churches which have been embedded in local communities for centuries hold precepts that explicitly encourage them to regard themselves as part of the wider community and naturally extend the help they offer to that community. This is true of many other communities also.

Myth 7

"Funding will imply support for the religious views/doctrine of the organisation."

Fact

This issue is not confined to faith based organisations. Local authorities and other bodies may want to include a disclaimer with any grant emphasising that funding does not imply support for views/doctrine, but in any case this implication is unlikely to be drawn. Local public bodies would fund only those functions which they consider to be of benefit to the community. Funding to organisations to deliver services does not imply endorsement of their overall organisational aims – whether they are religious or not.

Myth 8

"This is too much of a cosy relationship between faith and government."

Fact

Not at all, it is about local government and other parts of the local state, especially where *Total Place* is active, supporting those who are well placed to deliver the services which it is obliged to ensure are available locally.

Myth 9

"It means that non faith-based service providers in the third sector will be disadvantaged."

Fact

Not true. If other voluntary sector groups can offer the best service, the contract would go to them.

Myth 10

“If you engage with one faith community you will have always to engage with all the others in the same way, and all together.”

Fact

Not true. Whilst public authorities must not discriminate against religion and belief organisations in matters of engagement and the letting of contracts, there are great differences in scale, capacity and skills between faith communities in different parts of the country, just as there are across the wider third sector. Faith communities should be engaged with as appropriate to this context. For example, in some regions or sectors a faith community or religious organisation may be able to take on a large service contract while another community in the same area, or the same community or organisation in another region, may not yet be ready to do so.