



‘ENGAGING WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES’

Report on the workshop

Monday 25th September 2006
held at Durham County Council

By Fiona Damm, Faith Communities
Development Officer, for CRC

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The Aim of the workshop was to:

- 1 Identify key issues for statutory agencies engaging with faith communities
- 2 Raise awareness of the importance of 'religious literacy'
- 3 Identify ways to address key issues

20 people attended the event, 11 out of the 25 North East Regional local authorities were represented together with a representative from a Primary Care Trust, the Police and the Fire Service.

The welcome packs for delegates Included:

- an attendance list of delegates and their organisation
- a reference sheet on Government Guidance and related documents
- a summary of the CRC report on 'Faith in the North East'.

These are all attached as separate documents.

Paul Southgate, Chief Officer for the Churches' Regional Commission in the North East, welcomed everyone to the event, and gave a brief outline of the work done by CRC, and an overview of the Faith Regeneration in the North East project, and how it related to the day's events.

Presentations were given by Fiona Damm, Faith Regeneration in the North East' project officer, and Ian Hunter Smart, Community Development Officer for Durham County Council.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK FROM WORKSHOP 1

Why engage with Faith Communities? What's in it for you?

Three key themes emerged from the discussions. These were:

1. Statutory duties/Service Delivery

The Equality Act of 2006, and the Religions and Belief strand in the Equality standard for local government, and the implementation of impact assessments, have led to increased engagement with Faith groups.

Engagement with Faith groups was seen as being essential, in order to identify issues of faith which affect service delivery: 'Faith communities are involved with developing their community on many socio-economic

and cultural issues. Involvement with them as a statutory agency provides services according to the needs of these communities' Engagement with faith communities was also seen as a way of raising awareness within faith communities of other equality and diversity issues.

Faith communities also cut across all six strands of equality within one place (ie race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief and age,) and were seen as providing 'on the ground' access to community resources, skills, networks and venues.

2. Community Cohesion

Engaging with Faith communities was seen to be a key part of community engagement – to promote learning and shared knowledge and integration.

Engaging with a wider section of the community would better influence the services that were delivered.

It is important to challenge misconceptions and prejudices in order to promote good interactive cohesion and understanding.

3. Reflective Dimension

Engaging with faith groups brought a spiritual, moral and philosophical perspective to partnership work.

Faith it was felt, added an extra dimension to other engagement.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK FROM WORKSHOP 2

How do we engage with Faith Communities? Issues and good practice

1. Use existing structures/contacts

There were many suggestions put forward as to how to engage with Faith communities such as:

- contacting existing groups who were already engaged in consultation with community groups such as Local Strategic Partnerships
- or Community empowerment networks
- CVS's
- BME networks
- Churches together networks
- Visit places of worship where faith groups meet

Several people suggested finding a 'champion' in the community, or finding the gatekeeper/opener ie one contact would lead to many others. It was important to convince people of the value of engagement.

Engaging employees in large organisations, by conducting a workforce survey on religion and belief, and use them as a link to contact their Faith communities.

Other points of contact suggested were; linking to interface organisations ie 'university' students, or the students' union, as this would be a source of 'new' groups.

2. Good Practice

Any work done within the Faith community should be promoted and recognised by publicising this in the local press, newsletters, local authority publications etc.

It is important to spend time with communities in order to gain a better understanding of their culture and faiths.

It is important to meet people in their own territory.

Holding regular meetings with interfaith groups and statutory organisational representatives was considered to be a good way to:

- encourage participation of volunteers
- to give and exchange information
- take on board training, and certification
- and to proceed to share their learned knowledge and experience with other members of their communities.

Some examples of current engagement around the region:

- There are 5 neighbourhood groups which hold weekly meetings throughout Gateshead. The diversity forum meets every two months and the 'Visible ethnic Group' meet weekly in a community centre.
- Darlington organise local meetings to meet each other and encourage engagement.
- County Durham has a joint agency consultation on disability.
- Middlesbrough have a joint agency working group that has a 'consultation' work stream.

Evaluation of the event

The evaluation of the event was extremely positive. It was noted that there was a comprehensive number of representatives from statutory agencies present, and that the event had been well facilitated. The presentations were well presented and the event included a lot of participation.

All delegates cited meeting with other disciplines, being able to share good practices, discussing what works or doesn't work, and the ability to share current understanding on the issues surrounding faith as being extremely useful. As someone said 'it's good to know we are all in the same boat!'

Many people felt that the event had been important to challenge people's views on faith issues, and to help them think more fully about the subject. As one person said, 'Many good ideas and suggestions to hopefully help to influence and change mind sets'.

Have the objectives of the day been met?

1. The key issues on engagement with faith communities were:
 - I. Statutory agencies need to understand their communities in order to provide a coherent service delivery system. Faith communities cut across all six strands of equality. The issue for most people was how do you reach people who don't belong to the existing major groups?
 - II. It is important to challenge misconceptions and prejudices in order to promote good interactive cohesion and understanding. How can this be achieved?
 - III. It is essential to engage with Faith communities in order to identify issues of faith which may affect service delivery. The challenge for statutory agencies was how do you start to engage with Faith communities?
 - IV. A wide differentiation in the starting point of learning in relation to religious literacy can have an impact on operational practices.
 - V. A key issue was capacity, both in terms of personal knowledge about faith groups, time and resources.
 - VI. Consultation fatigue. The same organisations are approached to act as a contact point for statutory agencies wishing to engage with faith communities.
 - VII. Statutory agencies sometimes had difficulty in meeting with Government agendas balanced against the needs and capacity of Faith groups.
 - VIII. The difficulty of getting faith representation. How do you encourage participatory faith representation, with a proper mechanism for feeding back to faith communities?
2. Raising awareness of the importance of 'religious literacy'
 - I. Engaging with faith groups brought a spiritual, moral or philosophical perspective to partnership work.
 - II. It was important to engage with faith communities in order to understand their priorities/values and drive. Faith added an 'extra dimension' to other engagement.

III. Engagement was seen as an opportunity for statutory bodies to raise awareness with faith communities of other equality and diversity issues

3. Identify ways to address key issues

The following ideas were suggested as possible ways of addressing the issues raised at the workshop:

- The principle of a network is good, but practicalities may prove difficult.
- Can we use local networks e.g. NEREO, Equality Officer Network (Durham)?
- Use this informal group meeting/Forum every 5-6 months. Could have a shifting membership.
- E-network – needs funding and managing. Is everyone happy with e-communication?
- Has to be task focused, where we can learn from each other
- Joint organisational events (ownership and resources)
- The event could be used as an action learning set forum for faiths as part of wider diversity issues

The way forward:

Networking with other authorities to share good practice and get advice in faith issues, would be valuable in the future.

It was suggested that rather than a formal network, a similar event to this one could be run every 5 months or so, with a flexible delegate list so that people who were involved with faith issues, could attend. It was understood that any event should not just be a 'talking shop' but have a concrete focus or training element to it.

The 'Faith in the North East Regeneration Project' (which is due to finish in March 2007), and Durham County Council Community Development Team would like to take forward and develop the issues highlighted in the report in the future.

Comments, ideas or offers of help would be welcome, please contact:

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or

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Thank you to all who took part in the workshops, and/or completed the questionnaire

Copies of the presentations given by Fiona Damm and Ian Hunter Smart can be requested by e-mail as detailed above.