



South Tyneside Council



# Northern Inter Faith Stakeholder Event

## The Civic Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne

### Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2010

#### INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Northern Inter Faith Stakeholder event was commissioned by the North East Regional Faiths Network (NERFN), bringing together stakeholders from the 7 North East local authority areas outside the Tees Valley – Northumberland, Durham, Newcastle, Gateshead, Sunderland, North Tyneside and South Tyneside. NERFN undertook the design and planning of the event with support and input from the Churches’ Regional Commission (CRC), Government Office (GONE), all 7 local authorities and the Cedar Partnership. Newcastle City Council hosted the Northern event with some additional facilitating resources from the other authorities and public bodies in the North area. It followed a similar event organised in the Tees Valley.

#### DELEGATES

The 70 delegates included officers from the 7 local authorities, elected members, representatives from other public sector bodies including Government Office, NHS, fire and rescue service, police and offender management services, representatives from faith communities (both individuals and groups, other voluntary and community sector organisations, and from the Universities.



#### AIMS OF THE EVENT

The event had multiple aims: it sought to encourage and develop partnerships; to address practical issues and barriers to engagement; to encourage community cohesion; to consider the role of faith-based organisations in service delivery; how NERFN can contribute to and influence public policy; to provide a process to seek views of a wider group regarding the structure and strategy of NERFN. The event itself was designed to be interactive and participative with a mix of presentations and roundtable discussions. In his opening remarks, the chairperson for the day acknowledged the wide range of interests and expertise around the tables and encouraged delegates to network and share information and good practice.

#### THE KEY QUESTION and a CORE THEME ....

*“How can NERFN be useful to the various stakeholders and the organisations they represent in positively engaging faith communities in civic life?”* was suggested to the participants as a Key Question and ‘core theme’ they should keep in mind throughout the event. The keynote speaker, David Faulkner (Deputy Leader of Newcastle City Council), welcomed the event and connected its concerns and interests to Newcastle Council’s City for Peace policies. Recognising the challenges that Councils had to meet in the context of difficult times, such as reduced resources and service provision, he called for creative thinking away from a

'survival mentality'. This event provided the opportunity and process for such thinking about how faith groups can collaborate with each other and with public bodies without losing their distinctive identities and contribution. Local authorities and other public bodies also need to collaborate and share insights, expertise, wisdom and creative ideas with each other for 'the greater good' of the region as a whole

## **ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATIONS**

Discussions at Roundtable Groups focused on 2 main sets of themes: *'Engagement and Cohesion' and 'Policy Development and Service Provision'*

Resume and Findings from Roundtable discussions.....

### **1. Engagement and Cohesion**

#### *What are the barriers to effective faith engagement?*

LAs sometimes find difficulty in identifying faith communities and are not sure who to engage with and how. There can be a lack of knowledge and awareness about faiths and protocols. The constant restructuring of public bodies risks losing the links of engagement. For consistency, a single point of contact would be useful because different LA departments use different approaches.



Where no local faith network exists, some faith groups do not communicate with each other. This begs the question: why should faith groups work together? Some groups and individuals are not open to being engaged. Language and the position of women can present cultural constraints in respect of some communities. A lack of capacity or resources can also be a barrier.

Delegates did not feel that these barriers were insuperable: in the words of one group, "Do 'something' – don't try to do 'everything'." Delegates noted the importance of understanding each others' structures. They needed an overview of faith groups in the area giving contact details, facilities and resources, and areas of interest. This would improve connectivity and enable public bodies to be more proactive in establishing dialogue and involvement with faith groups. Effective dialogue rests on the willingness of both sectors to create opportunities and formal arrangements for communicating and working together towards a clear outcome. It also depends on the trust and confidence built through personal contact, local involvement, shared concerns and, ultimately, understanding of each other. One way might be to experience one another's 'worlds'; public servants, for example, might choose to volunteer some time working in a local community.

#### *How can faith groups and statutory partners encourage and sustain cohesion*

Notwithstanding the importance of structures, delegates felt that people more readily rally together around issues of common concern. It is therefore crucial to identify these issues, understand each other's agendas and share information. For example, faith groups work at the grass-roots level and can assist access to so-called 'hard to reach' groups. It should not be forgotten that both the public and faith sector have key allies – public servants who are people of faith, and faith groups who count public servants among their number – and we should not be shy of making use of such allies in fostering mutual understanding and collaboration.

On the one hand, greater understanding can be nurtured by developing mechanisms to improve 'religious literacy', including a basic awareness of significant faith festivals and protocols. This might be achieved, for instance, by visiting places of worship. On the other hand, 'civic literacy' needs to be developed and the public sector de-mythologised for faith groups. This should increase recognition of the faith sector's value by the public sector, and improve the faith sector's understanding of the reasons for engagement. The 'Big Society' concept is an unknown quantity thus far and this is where literacy on both sides needs developing. It was noted that NERFN has developed its "Engaging with Faith" training programme for local authority officers, to explore together their engagement with faith groups. Practically speaking, delegates recommended using Focus Groups at the early stages of policy development and using new technologies and a variety of techniques to involve wider consultation.

**Who should do what?** Delegates considered that public bodies' outreach could be done patiently by community development workers, building up trust and understanding both between faith groups and public bodies, and between faith groups themselves. Faith groups should be met 'where they are', as independent and not necessarily part of a hierarchy. Engagement happens at all levels: leaders in both sectors must engage but this does not preclude the need to involve grass-roots members of faith communities and frontline/customer-facing staff.

NERFN should act as the 'broker of engagement' to make introductions and inspire confidence. It should make a directory of organisations with tips on the best methods of approach. NERFN needs to act as a conduit or mechanism in relation to public bodies and faith groups, encouraging personal interaction and open dialogue around human rights issues; for example, sexual orientation and gender. It could also ask the question "Why should dialogue between faiths and public bodies actually happen"?

## **2. Role in policy and service delivery and appropriate structures to assist**

Delegates felt that the third sector is good at service delivery but is more than that. Interestingly, they asked if 'service' and 'support' mean the same thing to faith and public bodies. It was also pointed out that churches had led the way in providing social care, education and health care long before the state.

**What current roles do faith-based organisations have in policy development?** Engagement in policy development occurs to a certain extent, especially on social justice issues, though some found it hard to identify. Some felt that the Christian history of the UK, and the presence of people of faith within 'the system', have an influence upon policy. Faith groups are effective at lobbying, leading by ethical example, and organising hustings during elections. Faith representatives serve on some local strategic and other public partnerships such as the Community Safety Partnership. Others include an equalities champions group, a flexible forum (database of diversity groups), health care chaplains and SACREs. Faith groups are invited to participate in policy and impact assessments.

Delegates also identified hindrances to involvement such as 'gatekeepers' who deter engagement with women and children; the absence of liaison at strategic level; lack of knowledge and time; the difficulty of finding common ground due to factions within faiths and perhaps the failure of some faith representatives to consult with and feed back to their community.

**What current roles do faith-based organisations have in service delivery?** It was acknowledged that there is wide engagement by faith-based organisations in the delivery of services, much of which occurred 'beneath the radar'. Nevertheless, this type of engagement could filter into policy development. They include education at all levels; work with children and young people; adoption services; housing and homelessness services; asylum seeker, refugee and migrant support, ESOL; learning disability services; drug rehabilitation; offender rehabilitation; elderly care; day services and residential care provision; soup kitchens; mental health; counseling, Street Pastors and many more voluntary services

**What are the potential new areas of service delivery?** Some responses to this question indicated a lack of awareness about what faith groups are already doing – demonstrating the need to engage with faiths. The likelihood of some public services being cut back opens up areas for faith communities to put in tenders and shape what happens. Partnerships could be forged with local authorities to deliver services around crime, health, etc. Faith groups need to think about how to get involved, what are the most appropriate structures, and how best to influence policy.

Some suggestions put forward by delegates included community organising, responding to poverty and racism, health programmes incorporating spiritual well-being, alternative education schemes, specialist services to particular ethnic/religious groups, support for the elderly, environmental issues – shared spaces, Credit Unions, community hubs, public funded consultative body, Localism/Neighbourhood delivery, promote take-up of benefits, support existing services, and economic regeneration.

## **How can faith-based organisations become involved?**

*Which inter faith structures currently exist?* Delegates identified the following bodies dealing with inter faith relations in the North of the region: North East Regional Faiths Network, Newcastle Council of Faiths, the Faith Leaders Group, Gateshead Interfaith Forum, Gateshead Positive Images, Across Communities, People to People North East, County Durham Faiths Network, Council for Christians and Jews, Anglo/Indian, Gentoo Interfaith Group (Sunderland), Diocesan Commission for Interreligious Dialogue (Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle), Sunderland Interfaith Forum, Churches Together Groups, Churches' Regional Commission in the NE, South Tyneside Faiths Network.

*What needs to be done and who should do it?* Delegates voiced the need for a Regional Faiths Network with funding for staff support and asked how NERFN could be more effective as an information conduit and exchange. Properly resourced, it could provide a helpline for staff, service users and faith groups in relation to issues such as asylum seekers, homelessness, faith representation on partnerships, equality impact assessments, resource guides and interpretation services. It should support co-operation between public bodies and faith groups in local areas. Regional thematic networks and workshops could work alongside geographical networks. People need to know who is on these networks. Councils have a duty to involve all communities and they should each consider appointing a community development officer with a corporate remit to engage with faith communities, possibly helped by a staff inter faith group. NERFN should develop its "Engaging with Faith" training programme to suit public bodies and the voluntary sector.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- NERFN aims to provide guidance; advice and consultancy where necessary to support delegates to raise awareness about inter faith issues and concerns in their own organisations and agencies.
- The NERFN and CRC websites aim to offer information and intelligence about inter faith data and ensure that these are updated and easily accessible to all organisations and agencies. They should include a section giving tips on the best methods of approaching faith organizations.
- Local Authorities should be requested to post 'Inter faith Information' on their websites with links to key sources of intelligence and research findings: this to include the present report.
- NERFN should engage in development work and aim for identifiable 'inter faith networks' [large or small whatever is appropriate] in each respective Local Authority area.
- Faith-Based Organisations should be encouraged to consult and engage with each other and exercise their common voice, when appropriate, in relation to key issues and concerns facing the region: community cohesion, inequalities, political extremism, diversity tensions of all descriptions. NERFN should keep developing its Network.
- Local Authorities and public bodies should discuss with NERFN the sustainability of the Network and work out a settlement from each authority towards core costs and minimal resources to secure the future of the network

**Contact Address:** North East Regional Faith Network  
c/o Churches' Regional Commission  
Ushaw College  
Durham  
DH7 9RH

**Telephone:** (0191) 373 5453  
**Fax:** (0191) 373 7804  
**Email Address:** [crcnortheast@btconnect.com](mailto:crcnortheast@btconnect.com)