

Involving faith communities

The following text is adapted from *Involving Communities in Urban and Rural Regeneration: a Guide for Practitioners*, second edition (September 1997), published by DETR. It requires further updating in places to ensure that it is consistent with new policies and programmes, such as the *Urban White Paper* and the *New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal*. However the basic principles of engaging with faith communities are sound and are offered here as the basis of good practice.

Why involve faith communities?

Most public agencies concerned with renewal understand the need to involve voluntary & community organisations in their work. Equally no agency would be likely to underestimate the importance of involving ethnic minority groups. It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the Government's recognition of the faith communities' significant neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion role has yet to be reflected fully in local practice. The broad picture is still patchy, with enthusiasm in some areas matched by apparent reluctance to involve faith communities in others.

The faith communities' potential contribution in these fields is significant. This stems largely from the nature of their resources. Many of these they have in common with the voluntary & community sector. But they often have them at their disposal in unique ways. Indeed they may be the only community organisations with substantial resources in some neighbourhoods where the social infrastructure has been eroded:

- In terms of active membership churches, mosques, temples, synagogues and gurdwaras are often among the most substantial local community-based organisations, with as much right to be involved in discussion on neighbourhood renewal as, for example, residents' or tenants' organisations.
- Most places of worship are good sources of contacts. Their members usually live locally, and they have numerous links with surrounding communities. Memberships are often broad, embracing – for example, unemployed people, local business people, old and young.

Faith groups may be able to offer partnerships a gateway to other sectors of the community – and the place of worship may be the only local organisation able to reflect the views of particular ethnic groups.

Faith communities also have a role in delivering partnership or programme outcomes. Many of their organisations help to address local community needs as part of their faith-based networking, and they can be better resourced than other comparable bodies:

- Most have paid staff - priests, imams, pastors, rabbis; some have full or part time youth and community workers. Memberships often possess a useful range of managerial skills, too.

- They usually have their own premises - frequently centres for community activity and members' voluntary work.
- They often have access to funds unavailable to other organisations, including special trusts and members' goodwill offerings.
- They generally operate within legal and constitutional frameworks, and can draw on the resources of national networks or institutions.

It does not necessarily follow that *all* faith groups will be interested initially in becoming active partners in delivering neighbourhood renewal programmes. There may be tension within and between groups. Like other community organisations they may be unfamiliar with, for example, programme processes, bidding frameworks and monitoring requirements. They may need help in identifying and developing their management skills. In these respects they are no different from other community organisations – and their potential for neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion are too important to be ignored.

This summary of resources may be at odds with the perceptions some faith organisations have of themselves, struggling to maintain buildings or fund activities. But the range of their resources - human, material, spiritual – can still be greater than that of many other community-based organisations.

Mapping local faith communities

Although there are no comprehensive data on the sizes of faith communities nationally or locally, the situation should greatly improve following inclusion of a religious affiliation question in the 2001 National Census.

The relationship between faith and ethnic identity is often close. National Census data on ethnic origin may indicate whether there are likely to be sizeable faith communities, other than Christian, in your area. Many people from Asia or Africa, or whose ancestry is there, belong for example to the Hindu, Muslim or Sikh communities.

It is usually best to start by identifying key faith organisations in target areas or, in the case of programmes covering large areas or particular issues, key individuals within faith communities – ideally with special expertise. They should know which groups and communities are represented locally, and they should also be able to provide contacts.

Establishing a contacts database is not necessarily straightforward, as many faith organisations operate independently of one another. The book *Religions in the UK: a Multi-Faith Directory* is the most comprehensive list. (See www.multifaithnet.org). You may have to rely on networking to establish a list of initial contacts, asking them to identify further ones.

Remember, however, that the best person to speak to may not be the formal religious leader. This may instead be the president of the mosque - or in other communities the treasurer or secretary. These people may be able to bring valuable skills to partnerships and projects, as well as extensive local contacts.

Working with faith communities

Methods for working with local communities can all be applied to working with faith communities. These can be categorised thus:

- Networking
- Small group meetings and action planning events
- Public meetings

Nevertheless you should judge whether it would be best to involve faith communities in mainstream community-wide consultations, or to set up separate consultative mechanisms. The same issue arises in relation to the involvement of ethnic minority communities – but you should be guided by those you seek to involve.

Before approaching faith communities, you should not only give some thought as to how you will be perceived, but you should brief yourself on the traditions and beliefs of the groups you intend to visit. *Religions in the UK; a Multi-Faith Directory* summarises the belief systems and practices of the main faiths in Britain, but do not let lack of knowledge deter you from talking to people. They will not expect you to know everything about their faiths.

An open, honest approach to people should produce positive responses. Be prepared to listen more than to talk. Do not be afraid to ask if you wish to learn something. It is safer to acknowledge ignorance than to make possibly false assumptions. Do not pretend to be an expert! Above all, treat people as individuals. *Religions in the UK: a Multi-Faith Directory* has a useful section *Making Contact* on setting up inter-faith meetings and projects. Another resource is the *Local Inter Faith Guide* which can be downloaded free from www.interfaith.org.uk

Networking

An essential step toward involving faith communities is networking with one-to-one meetings at churches, mosques, temples, synagogues or gurdwaras. This is strongly recommended since it may be difficult, at least initially, to talk to representatives of different faiths - or even different traditions of the same faith - in a group setting. It also takes account of possible tensions between those of different faiths or traditions. It is better to explore in this way the feasibility of bringing together representatives of different faiths or traditions before proceeding with small group meetings or action-planning events.

You should think creatively about who you need to talk to when networking. Women's networks can provide valuable contacts. Women members of some ethnic minority communities may hold the key to establishing new initiatives. Many faiths have a variety of youth organisations – a reminder of the importance of faith in the lives of numerous young people.

Small group meetings and action planning events

Workshops and action planning events are effective at engaging faith communities. For example, Planning for Real techniques were used in the planning stages for

the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre developed in North Kensington with City Challenge funding. Because tensions may exist between or within faith groups you should try to establish common ground – particularly in the contexts of social justice, poverty, and care for all community members.

It is crucial when organising meetings and events involving faith communities to take account of such matters as regular days and times of worship. Factors to consider when organising meetings involving faith communities are set out below.

Organising events with faith communities

The time

Consult a diary of faith festivals. Avoid events at major festival times and the risk of excluding certain faiths.

Remember regular days set aside by the faiths for worship:

- the Sabbath is sacred to Jews and begins at sundown on Friday
- Juma Prayer, midday on Friday, is a special time for Muslims
- most Christians and some other faiths worship on Sunday. Some black majority churches worship on into the early afternoon; some keep Saturday as the Sabbath
- be attentive to the needs of Muslims during Ramadan

The place

- Select a neutral venue. It will probably be acceptable to meet in a church building if you wish to involve different Christian denominations, but if you want to engage people of different faiths it may be better – depending on the circumstances - to avoid the place of worship of any one faith.
- Ask if people have special needs: some faith groups pray at regular times of day and will need a space set aside. The room should not contain unsuitable photos, pictures or ornaments. Bear in mind that some faiths require facilities for washing before prayer.

What to eat

- Vegetarian food is likely to be acceptable to people of most faiths and tastes. Many religious food regulations concern meat; going vegetarian should enable most people to share a meal.
- If you are expecting Hindus, remember to isolate and label fish and egg dishes. Jewish people may ask for kosher food.
- Don't be surprised if people enquire who has prepared the food, and where it has been prepared.
- Remember not everyone drinks tea or coffee. Don't forget to check that biscuits are vegetarian by examining the ingredients panel on the packet.
- Consider if anyone will be fasting.

Also remember

- Inviting just one delegate could pose problems. Invite two people so that the group does not have to choose between, for example, its most senior representative and its best English speaker.
- If you want a group of men and women, explain carefully and ask tactfully. Clarify whether women wish to raise issues in mixed company or only among themselves. If you are a man, be willing to leave the room if appropriate.
- Seek advice, help and feedback from those you are inviting. Invite others to host the event with you, but don't necessarily expect them to be able to contribute to organisation costs.

Public meetings

Traditional public meetings are generally a less satisfactory way to secure community involvement than approaches offering more scope for interaction. Nevertheless the issues already highlighted should be borne in mind when organising or running public meetings.

Involvement in partnership structures and programme delivery

Partnership boards

An issue to bear in mind when engaging faith community representatives on partnership boards is how members of other faith communities or traditions may react. The possibility of adverse reaction should not be ignored. Candidates must be sensitive to how other faith groups may feel, demonstrating willingness to work and communicate with people of all faiths. It may be possible to assess possible reactions prior to making appointments.

Programme management

There is no need necessarily to establish specific multi-faith forums to ensure faith community input into regeneration programmes. It may be equally appropriate that people from various faith-based organisations are involved in particular topic or issue based groups, rather than having their own forum. Often this will be a more effective way of ensuring that faith communities are involved in the management of the programmes. Topic based groups are more appropriate mechanisms through which to involve people in monitoring programme performance, than forums based on the characteristics of the people involved (e.g. a multi-faith forum).

Whether to establish a forum for particular faith communities or to involve people from those communities in topic forums is an issue to be worked out at local level, in consultation with faith-based organisations themselves. In some areas, faith leaders are already active in residents' associations. Be careful not to accidentally undermine existing local inter-faith initiatives.

Key points concerning the involvement of faith communities

- Faith communities have a significant contribution to make to neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion. Compared with other community organisations they are often well resourced, have broad memberships with wide ranges of community contacts.
- Faith communities can help partnerships understand the needs and concerns of local people or groups with particular needs, and will often be interested in sponsoring projects to meet local needs.
- Identifying local faith groups in your area will require networking. The book *Religions in the UK: A Multi-Faith Directory* is a useful resource. ICRC and the Inter Faith Network can provide advice.
- Before engaging in discussion with faith group representatives, it helps to be aware of their key beliefs; but do not be deterred from talking to people by lack of knowledge. An open, honest approach should produce a positive response.
- Decide whether you need to involve faith communities in mainstream community-wide consultations or to set up separate mechanisms. Seek guidance from those you are seeking to involve about their preferred approach.
- When organising meetings and events be aware of such matters as regular days and times of worship. Be careful in your choice of venue and catering.
- There may be merit in establishing specific structures, such as multi-faith forums enabling faith communities to express their views. Check first with the Inter-Faith Network - www.interfaith.org.uk - to see if there are any initiatives in your area. However, it may be more appropriate to involve faith community representatives in general issue-based or community forums.
- Think carefully how appointing the representative of a particular faith to a partnership board would be perceived by people of other faiths or traditions within the same faith. Assess as far as possible the likely reaction to the candidate.

Ensure that there are effective mechanisms allowing ongoing consultation with all groups. If you make a determined effort to involve everyone, no one can complain they have been excluded.