

**East of England Faiths Council and LGA Civic literacy training.**  
**Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> May 2009, Elvedon, Thetford.**

Sponsored by: EEFC, East of England Regional Assembly, and 'Aspire 2 Perform'.

Chair: Rt. Revd James Langstaff, Faith Representative on EERA. (Bishop of Lynn)

Although billed as a training course, the purpose was to give a forum where faith communities and local/regional government officers could discuss their organisational structures and the issues faced when government and faith groups sought to engage.

Tony Adams of central Government's Faith Community Engagement Team (FCET) outlined the range of attitudes toward the policy of involving faith communities in public policy guidance: From the entirely favourable, to saying that government should be entirely secular. There are 9 main objectives identified by the FCET:

1. Encourage interfaith dialogue (Faith to Faith initiative – 2008)
2. Promote strong positive growth between people of different faiths.
3. Encourage social action by faith communities working together.
4. Develop the capacity of faith based organisations. Funding church buildings report 2009.
5. Develop faith community's role in Third Sector: Social Enterprises.
6. Develop local/regional/national partnerships between government and faith groups.
7. Preventing violent extremism, including encouraging majority voices.
8. Overcoming barriers for the voiceless – not just listening to powerful 'Elders'.
9. Coordinating role across government aiming for greater consistency.

Responding to the question of why Government does this work, TA gave three main reasons: A way of engaging people who are hard to reach through people who are well connected. Cost effective way of doing social welfare. Government's desire to 'grasp the nettle' of engaging with the smaller groups within society.

TA was challenged regarding FCET practice of engaging with 9 major world faiths rather than all faiths equally. He noted that it would be too difficult to engage with all faiths equally.

A question asking about what drives the present Government, given the past comment 'We don't do God', drew the reply that they do not get involved with theology except in terms of combating extremism. Government works with faith groups because of their skills and experience for 'social good' even if it does not hold a particular faith. This is especially relevant with the integration of migrants into society.

The issue of funding faith groups brought the comment that government funding is now aimed at interfaith groups rather than individual faiths. This led to comments from a Hindu attendee regarding government funding Muslim groups [to combat extremism] and what seems to be the bypassing of the Hindu community. A question later in the day drew out that funding would not be available for a faith community building that would be open to the general community, but would be available for a (general) Community building that was open to faith communities. This highlighted problems regarding the word 'community'.

The suggestion that government produced a document that highlighted the positive similarities and shared values between faiths was rejected. Such a document could be seen as government defining what acceptable belief was.

Reference had been made to a 'Charter of Excellence'. TA was asked to explain what it was. It is a work-in-progress whose purpose is to relieve the nervousness of government departments regarding giving money to faith groups. Helping "to sort out the mad and bad." It will consist of a clear set of principals which faiths can sign up to, if they wish, to reduce misunderstanding. It may be finished by the end of 2009.

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In the absence of Canon Graham Hedger (Dioc. of Eds. & Ips.) Ellis Wineburger of EEFC led a discussion on why faith groups might seek to be represented in local public sector bodies. He noted that it was about 'helping to shape consensus'. We can not assume that we have the only voice that people will hear, and we can make things happen within local government. He also noted that faith groups find difficulty in engaging with local government in terms of the vast amount of papers produced for meetings, the acronyms, and breaking into existing networks.

Faith groups feel they have expertise and experience to offer for social good but can have problems with engaging with the structures of government. Faith groups don't just talk about social cohesion; they live it out by their actions (eg. care of the elderly etc).

It was noted by a government officer that sometimes government departments have difficulty engaging with each other. As meetings mostly interest people who like meetings, government officials were being encouraged to visit faith groups rather than invite them to attend meetings. However it was noted the government does always know who to talk to. Some faiths do not have a hierarchy and so it is difficult to speak to the whole of a faith community in one area, and some faiths are less than "opaque" as to their structure. The area of Emergency Planning was highlighted as one area where time and effort has been put into making good connections. (eg. The Northants directory of faith groups)  
The best relationships are those that are built up over a long period of time – maybe starting from very small beginnings.

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Cheryl Lowe, Cohesion and Faith Policy Lead, GO-East (EERA) outlined the structure of government at District/Unitary/County level.

She noted that government at this level spends over £70 Billion a year, and employs over 2 million people in 700 different functions. There are over 1,600 town and parish council in the East of England. Elected councillors in England and Wales number over 20,000. County, Unitary, District/Borough and Parish councils are all independent of each other. Some of the jargon was explained and how some structures play host to other parts: eg. East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) host the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership 'Improvement East' (IE)... not to be confused with the other 'IE' which is 'Inspire East', which is the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Communities which is hosted by East of England Development Agency (EEDA).

Four different structures of council were outlined (Leader and Cabinet, Elected mayor and cabinet, Traditional committee, and, CEO and Directors) before a brief look at where they get and spend their finances. Comprehensive Area Assessment and the background and purpose of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP's) were discussed as were the challenges that are faced. The reasons and benefits for faith groups to get involved with LSPs were given.

The following webpage was given as a reference point for faith groups.

[http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/ufpublic/how\\_your\\_council\\_works\\_handy\\_guide\\_2008\\_09.pdf](http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/ufpublic/how_your_council_works_handy_guide_2008_09.pdf)

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Gloria Culyer (CEO of Age Concern, Cambs) discussed how an LSP works using Cambs Landscape & Fenland Strategic Partnership, of which she is a member, as an example.

Although there is no official countywide LSP, Cambridgeshire Together and Local Area Agreement, plus the alignment of the Sustainable Community Strategies work together in a partnership of partnerships with strong voluntary and business sector representation. LSPs benefit from the voluntary sector in a number of ways: engagement of local communities; provision of skills; experience and knowledge used to design and deliver services and influence those who plan and provide services; avoid duplications; direct link with communities and knowledge of 'what's going on'; strengthens relationships between sectors; provides access to community networks.

<http://www.communities.go.uk/documents/communities/pdf/923277.pdf>

It was noted that anybody representing any grouping at LSP needs to be clear about their aim in being there and how they will know if they are achieving that aim. Also, does everyone they represent actually agree with that aim? Sometimes representation is best done as sub-group level rather than at the LSP itself.

The benefits and challenges for voluntary sector/faith groups were discussed.

Benefits included: Getting their voice heard; Influence on behalf of communities; Increasing capacity and capability to provide services; Access to wider resources; Gaining acknowledgement for what they do; Better placed to 'make the case' for community based activities.

Challenges were seen as: How do you choose a representative? ; Can one person represent a diverse group?; How will feedback be disseminated?; The need to learn LSP 'language'; Being able to trust and understand other members of LSP to enable full and open communications.

During the lunch break, a number of attendees discussed what was defined as a faith. They also discussed the issue: Can one person represent all faiths? Eg. Could a Muslim effectively represent Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh and Humanist community groups?

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Rita Fentener, a Consultant/Researcher and Project Manager at Red Ochre (a social enterprise providing management consultancy – [www.redochre.org.uk](http://www.redochre.org.uk)) presented the key findings and practical implications of faith groups (who had received funding from the Faith Communities Capacity-Building Fund) getting involved with LSPs.

The research was commissioned by the Community Development Fund. In summary, *'overall, the faith-based organisations and local government have built positive and mutually beneficial relationships. A number of challenges remain but these can be addressed. Faith forums and LSPs are seen as simple, direct and effective methods of engagement which help in facilitating and improving the relationship-building experience, but these should*

*complement, not replace the need to continue to engage directly with faith communities.'*  
*[from Rita's presentation]*

The full report can be found at:

[http://www.cdf.org.uk/SITE/UPLOAD/DOCUMENT/Research%20and%20Evaluation/faith\\_complete\\_lo.pdf](http://www.cdf.org.uk/SITE/UPLOAD/DOCUMENT/Research%20and%20Evaluation/faith_complete_lo.pdf)

In open discussion a number of points were made:

- Filling in forms for government funding can be very difficult. Assistance is often needed.
- Faith Groups can be the “voice of the voiceless” within the structure.
- It is easier for established churches/faith communities to engage with government, but difficult for the recently arrived (eg. Eastern European faith groups) and those who do not have a formal structure.
- Probably fewer funds will be available for single faith projects. Multi-faith applications will win over single faith applications.
- The need for both faith groups and government to agree on a definition of what is a community.

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Notes compiled by:

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