



West
Midlands
Funders
Network

Faith-based organisations and their role in civil society

March 2023

About Us

West Midlands Funders Network

West Midlands Funders Network is the only cross-sector membership network for people and organisations who give funding to communities in the West Midlands.

We work with independent trusts and foundations, public sector bodies, local authorities, lottery funders and corporate and social investors, helping them to use their resources effectively to support local communities in the region. This means we help our members ensure that funding meets the needs of local people and that resources get to the places where they are needed most and can have the most impact.

We support funders to engage in everything from regular events and seminars to facilitating projects for collaboration, learning and data analysis and good practice and intelligence sharing.

Near Neighbours

Near Neighbours brings people together of different faiths, races and cultural backgrounds. This is so that they can get to know each other better to build stronger community connections, grow relationships of trust and collaborate with each other to improve their local communities. Support is provided through seed funding, training & development, mentoring and encouraging cohesive engagement.

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Seminar Summary

The Role of Faith and Faith based Organisations addressing inequality and meeting social needs

1. Background and context to the seminar

During the pandemic years there was a rise in the role of faith institutions and faith-based organisations in meeting needs of communities of interest and place that were not currently being reached by statutory bodies and funders that led to greater collaboration.

The event held on the 28th February at Balsall Heath Church Community Centre, was an opportunity to take the learning from the: All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society report (Keeping the Faith), and bring together faith based organisations, funders and wider stakeholders to build upon the learning to address inequalities and meet social needs in the West Midlands.

Key objectives:

- Improving funders' understanding of the faith and faith based organisation and its role in different communities of interest and place
- Examining the role of faith networks and groups and the importance of faith and faith values in partnership working to address social need and inequalities for communities of interest and place
- Improve understanding of different faiths and faith-based organisations (particularly those non-Christian faith that have grown in different communities in the WM) and their experience of discrimination; how faith intersects with other experiences of inequalities and disadvantage

2. Key points from Presentation: Professor Chris Baker, Goldsmith, UCL

Professor Chris Baker's full presentation can be [downloaded here](#).

The changing nature of faith and belief on our society:

- The pandemic opened up a new conversation about religion and belief and created the conditions for a 'new normal' of partnership-working across faith and secular agencies.
- What does public policy look like if we manage to invest in this 'new normal' and work strategically to keep that space alive?

The diversity of faiths has grown in England and Wales. The 2021 Census on religion (where 94% chose to answer the voluntary question on religion) show that all other faiths have seen an increase since the last 2011 Census apart from the Christian faith which has fallen. In the West Midlands, the diversity of faiths is reflected nationally and responses show that 61.3% of the population identify with a religious affiliation and 32.8% do not.

Professor Chris Baker, drew from the Keeping the Faith Reports, which was researched in July/August of 2020, 408 Local Authorities in the UK were approached as part of the research and received 194 different local authorities (48%) responding to the research. 55 interviews were held with Local Authority leaders and faith group/faith-based organisation leaders/managers in 10 Local Authority areas.

The key points from the research:

- 67% of Local Authorities reported an increase in partnership working since the pandemic started.
- 91% said that their experience of pandemic partnership working with faith groups/FBOs was 'Very Positive' or 'Mostly Positive'
- 76% said that they intended to continue the partnership working developed with faith groups during the pandemic into the future, including 47% who said 'Yes, but probably with some changes'.

The shifting perspectives on experience of faith-based organisations and groups working with local authorities during the pandemic were:

- Adding value due to longstanding presence in local community (88%)
- Providing pool of volunteer resources (79%)
- Improving access to hard-to-reach groups (79%)
- Acting as a source of local leadership (78%)
- Articulating and promoting social transformation (62%)
- Lack of representation by women and young people at meetings (17%)
- Safeguarding concerns (9%)
- Socially conservative (7%)
- Possibility of proselytization (3%)



3. Outcome from Small Table Discussions between faith groups/organisations, funders and wider stakeholders

Four questions were posed for discussion in smaller groups of participants and feedback for wider reflection.

1. What has been the experience of faith-based organisations in accessing resources and funding?

The following key areas were reflected in discussion:

a. Points raised on the operations of funders and funding programmes and approaches

- The restrictive timeframe to access funding opportunities and length of time funding is available for
- Access to funding information and knowing who the funders are for everyone in communities
- Lottery related funding derived from gambling is not accessible to all faith groups.

b. Faith groups and faith organisations making connections with funders

- Lack of 1-2-1 relationships between faith organisations and funders
- Funders reverting to the 'usual suspects'
- Lack of capacity to get funding to build relationships with funders – many groups are small with small teams of staff and/or volunteers
- Two way dialogue takes time to establish and funders potentially have greater capacity to nurture positive relationships

c. Faith groups/organisations perception of funders

- Previous concerns of proselyting but may be less of a concern now but not sure
- Feel barriers are put in place to rule out faith organisations applying for funding
- View that outcomes achieved by faith groups are not for all therefore harder to fund

Exploration of specific funders for the faith sector and a concern that not there is not enough availability of funds for faith specific causes.

One idea to address the experience of faith based organisations and groups accessing funding and resources was the development of joint training between faith groups and funders to raise awareness and understanding of common goals and challenges/barriers to access funding.

2. What have we learnt from working in partnership during crisis situations that works?

3. What needs to continue?

Much of the small table discussions focussed on the attitudinal change experienced between faith groups and organisations, funders and wider stakeholders.



Developing and Sustaining Good Partnership	What works?	What needs to continue?
Developing Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respecting difference • Taking risks • Respecting each other's capacity to contribute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating together • Face to face meetings • Invest time in each other • Work on informal friendships
Sharing values, ethos and motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having shared goals • Reducing duplication • Identifying the common ground on which to engage with each other • Respecting difference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a shared vision • Achieving solutions together • Better understanding, flexibility and ability to adapt • Funders must listen
Embracing new mindsets, including reimagining the structure of governance and finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory bodies having positive perceptions of the role of faith institutions and giving more respect to their roles in times of crisis • Working together with all faiths. Not silo working • Taking risks on innovative ways to engage and to deliver to meet need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to the community to understand needs • What are we asking youth and what do they want • Champion local heroes, community partnership engagement events, LA and volunteer groups and faith groups in local areas • No community is 'hard to reach'. Speak their language and listen to them
A willingness to communicate regularly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased communication between different statutory bodies as well as with the faith groups/organisations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling good stories and celebrating achievements
Developing shared goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respecting each other's capacity • Recognition of skills strengths, resources • Recognition of the role of faith groups and the community sector in times of crisis • Recognition of lots of good will 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively engage in co-design of solutions • Sharing of best practice

4. How do we shift power to address pressing inequality and social needs?

The following key points were raised that focused on empowerment and developing new leadership and challenging existing leadership.

- Understand local needs and inequalities
- Build capacity in most vulnerable communities
- Give vulnerable communities a voice – empower communities through training, equip people with the skills and confidence to engage and participate in designing solutions
- Hold neighbourhood plans and hub conversations
- Hold existing leaders to account
- Diversity in leadership in communities – where communities lead
- Embed collective responsibility
- Take an asset based approach with people and places and look to build bottom up and not top down

There is potential for a range of funders and wider stakeholders in the West Midlands to follow up on key points raised in the event at an individual organisational level as well as looking to collaborate or work jointly on building upon the learning from partnership working during the pandemic.

With the diversity of faiths that exist in the West Midlands there continues to be a need to better understand and raise awareness of the role of different faiths and its intersection with race and ethnicity and culture, and how faith based organisations organise and address pressing social needs.

Engaging beyond the existing faith leaders to tackle pressing inequalities and social need will be critical. Clearly there are remains gaps in working and giving voice to young people as well as building upon some of the key aspects of strong partnership working such as transparency, talking honestly about conflict and misunderstandings and developing data driven solutions.

5. Thanks and Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking Professor Chris Baker for contributing to the event and using the learning from the research: Keeping Faith to stimulate ongoing discussion between faith groups and faith organisations with funders and wider stakeholder on how we can constructively build upon the positive developments and address some of the gaps and challenges.

In addition, I'd like to thank Peter Cunnison, Trustee, WM Funders Network for chairing the event and contributing to discussion, and Rabiya Latif and her team for hosting the event and encouraging a range of faith based organisations and groups across Birmingham and the Black Country to participate.





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