



GUIDE TO INTERFAITH

Tips and tools to help residents in
Barking and Dagenham to connect and
engage with neighbours from different
backgrounds

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INTRODUCTION

What is this guide?

This guide is for residents who want to better get to know their neighbours or connect with someone who is from a different faith or belief. It is suitable for someone who is new to interfaith or someone who has been involved in interfaith events before but wants to do a bit more, maybe even host their own event or activity.

Through this guide we offer some starting points for you to organise small events or gatherings that will help bring people together for interfaith dialogue. You may want to use the ideas set out in the guide to organise something for your street, school, place of work, community centre or place of worship.

Local and national organisations are also signposted, highlighting more opportunities for you to get involved with.

Who are the Faith & Belief Forum?

The Faith & Belief Forum is one of the UK's leading interfaith organisation – we work towards a connected and supportive society where people of different faiths, beliefs and cultures have strong, productive and lasting relation.

Since 2018, we have been working in Barking and Dagenham delivering a range of programmes and events that give residents the opportunity to explore their faith, belief and values by meeting and working with neighbours from different backgrounds.

FIRST STEPS FOR INTERFAITH

Who lives in Barking and Dagenham?

The borough of Barking and Dagenham is very diverse in terms of faith and belief, with 75% of residents identifying with a religion or faith [1].

There is also a rich and vibrant faith sector, with 128 faith-based organisations in the borough including a former royal monastery (Barking Abbey), a beacon mosque (Al-Madina Mosque), a gurdwara that serves the East London Sikh community (Barking Gurudwara), and a temple that serves the Nichiren Shu community for the whole of Northern Europe (Nichiren Shu Temple) and a local faith forum (Barking & Dagenham Faith Forum) [2]

What is interfaith and is it relevant to me?

The word 'interfaith' means different things to different people. At the Faith & Belief Forum we see interfaith as people of different faith, belief and cultural backgrounds getting to know each other and deepening their understanding of their differences and similarities.

Interfaith is relevant to everyone and is something we can all participate in. No matter what background or level of knowledge you have about different faiths and beliefs, there is always more to learn about those who live around you. When we are better connected as a local community, we are better placed to support each other, to work together towards areas of shared concern, and to advocate for those in our local area who are in need. Meeting new people can also challenge our own biases and prejudices (which we all have!), and enable us to reflect on our beliefs, traditions and life experiences.

[1] <https://www.lbbd.gov.uk/population-and-demographic-data>

[2] <https://www.lbbd.gov.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Faith-groups-and-meeting-places-evidence-base-study.pdf>

How can I start?

Meeting new people from different faiths, beliefs and backgrounds can be daunting for some people. We might be nervous about how other people will perceive and treat us, as well as whether we will have enough in common for conversation to flow well. We also might be hesitant about offending or upsetting someone by what we say or do. If you are nervous about these things we suggest focusing on getting to know people as individuals first and foremost: a general rule whilst getting to know someone is to ask rather than assume. No one is expecting you to be an expert on all traditions.

For beginners, we suggest:

- Start on your own street – introduce yourself to your neighbours, find out more about their lives and families, what they like to do in their spare time, and how they came to live there
- Power your social media – follow local places of worship, community centres and community leaders from different backgrounds to discover more about what is happening in your area
- Join in public celebrations and educational events - from local community groups from backgrounds different to your own
- Get involved with and support campaigns - from local community groups from backgrounds different to your own
- Get your family involved – sometimes learning alongside young people can make adults feel more comfortable. Remind yourself and your family throughout that:
 - It is okay to feel challenged and uncomfortable when meeting new people – this is a very common experience

- It's okay to ask questions if you don't know – local places of worship and community leaders are great resources for you to ask specifics about religion, faith, belief, and culture. (NB: It is important to remember that every individual and family practises slightly differently, so what you hear at a place of worship may be different to what your neighbour does or believes)
- If you get asked questions or hear comments that you aren't comfortable with, you always have a right to walk away
- This is all about making new friends and learning, so have fun!

What do local people say about interfaith?

"I have family from different faiths and cultures. I think it is important to engage in interfaith work because people have a lot of misconceptions about people different to them".

"Faith is such an integral part of some people's lives and so it is important that we learn about it whether we adhere to a specific religious tradition or not."

"I have seen how dialogue can challenge and explore questions relating to power (and powerlessness) and privilege. It has the potential to enable the most unlikely relationships to emerge and consequently the most potential for change."

EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Now that you have formed strong relationships with those around you, as well as continuing to nourish these, the next step is to carve out ways of working together. Events, campaigns, and partnerships across communities can create opportunities for even greater impact, trust and friendship.

There are many ways that you can collaborate formally and informally with neighbours from different backgrounds. If you are part of an established organisation or group you may want to partner up with another local group to collaborate on an event or campaign

How can I start?

The first step is to invite a group of neighbours to come together and identify shared areas of interest, what you want to achieve by collaborating, and how much time and budget everyone can contribute.

When talking through ideas, it might be wise to discuss things like:

- What is the need in our local community? What change do we want to see?
- What would our communities find fun and exciting to get involved with? What would help them build new friendships?
- Are there any festivals or important days coming up that we should avoid when planning our event or project? Tip: Refer to [RE:Online's festivals calendar](https://www.reonline.org.uk/festival-calendar/) for key dates. [3]

[3] <https://www.reonline.org.uk/festival-calendar/>

- How can we ensure everyone from our communities is able to access our event or project?
 - Are there some spaces or activities that are comfortable or not for different people?
 - How does the group feel about shared worship?
 - Is there some food and drink that should be avoided?

Tip: Check out [National Interfaith Week's faith-based dietary requirements guide](#) for details. [4]
- How can we ensure vulnerable people are safeguarded at our event or project?

Ideas for collaboration

Below are some examples of interfaith events we have seen in local communities which have worked well:

- Cooking together: bringing people together to learn to cook dishes together, from different backgrounds represented in the community
- Skills sharing: different members of the community take it in turns to host a session where they share their expertise or passions
- Holding a street party: one street work together to put on family-friendly activities and entertainment which will involve everyone who lives there
- Fundraising for a local cause: neighbours work together to build momentum for a cause they are passionate about across the local community

[4] www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/Catering-and-Faith-Based-DietaryPractice.pdf

- Visiting each other's places of worship: community members take it in turns to host their neighbours at their place of worship, give a tour, and answer questions
- Arranging a dialogue day for young people: youth workers from different communities organise a dialogue day where young people can meet, make new friends, and ask questions
- Volunteering at each other's projects: hold a volunteer swap day where volunteers from different community projects give their time to another community
- Hosting an open mic night: showcase local talent by inviting local musicians, poets, comedians, spoken word artists from different backgrounds to share a stage
- Film screening and discussion: the film 'Ways of Connecting', which showcases stories of Barking and Dagenham residents from different backgrounds, could be a great starting point for discussion and sharing of personal stories

HOSTING SPACES FOR DIALOGUE

Creating a welcoming and inclusive space

When bringing together a group of new people, it is important to make sure everyone feels welcomed and included. Below are some tips for creating a welcoming and inclusive space:

- Hosts from different backgrounds – it may help people feel more relaxed and like an event is for them if they see hosts and volunteers on the welcoming team from their community
- Neutral venue – some people will not be comfortable visiting another place of worship or community centre. Think about a venue that people may feel equally comfortable in, or alternating between different venues
- ‘Here to help’ badges or signs – signal through uniforms, badges or signs who guests can approach if they need help or want to ask a question
- Ensuring that everyone is heard – take responsibility for ensuring everyone who wants to is given the chance to contribute to discussions and that contributions are valued and heard
- Open and accessible topics for discussion - Ask questions to keep the conversation flowing, balanced and interesting. Do not assume all guests are part of a religion or faith or have the same level of knowledge about their own or other faiths or beliefs
- Calling out and challenging unacceptable behaviour – if there is any prejudicial behaviour it is important to ensure guests are safe and supported and that these are addressed

Dialogue versus Debate

When hosting interfaith discussions, you might like to ask guests at the beginning to think about the concept of 'dialogue not debate' and as a group agree to aim towards engaging in a dialogue.

Here is what some local people said about the difference between dialogue and debate from them:

In a dialogue:

- the purpose is to understand each other better
- you respect that people have different points of view
- you listen to what the other person is saying to see what you can learn from them
- you talk from the position of personal beliefs and experience - we are all experts on ourselves
- you try to understand why people believe what they do, what it means to them, and how they live their faith or belief
- you have an open-minded and curious attitude

In a debate:

- the purpose is to win, to have the majority view or to convince others
- you focus on differences of opinion as a negative or challenging thing
- you try to trip up people with different opinions or prove them wrong
- you have an adversarial and confrontational attitude

Using simple but powerful activities

Dialogue activities do not have to be complex. Here are three of our favourite dialogue activities which are simple to manage but which can result in powerful discussions:

- Story of my name

Guests find a partner and share their name, what it means, who named them, any nicknames, and a name they would choose if they were to have a new one. Share some responses with the group.

- Things the same and things different

Ask guests to get into groups of four and ask them to come up with as many things as a group that are similar about them, and as many things as possible that are different. Get feedback on what surprised them, and the categories they noted.

- Special objects

Ask guests to bring along an object which is special to them, related to their faith, religion, or culture. Give each person a few minutes to explain to the group what they have brought along and why.

LOCAL EVENTS AND RESOURCES

Barking and Dagenham Faith Forum

The Barking and Dagenham Faith Forum works to promote racial and religious harmony. We believe that intolerance has no place in Barking and Dagenham, and that diversity adds value to our community. We host a variety of events throughout the year.

<http://bdfaithforum.org.uk>

Summer of Festivals

In 2015, LBBD held a number of events across the borough to celebrate their 50th anniversary. Due to the success in 2015, they now hold 10 events throughout the Summer. Groups can apply to small funds to take part in the planning and creation of the events, all events are free for residents to attend.

www.lbdd.gov.uk/summer-of-festivals

LBBD's Equality and Diversity Calendar

Each year LBBD organises a range of events and projects to celebrate and promote equality and diversity within the borough - these are mostly highlighted in their Equality and Diversity Calendar. Charities and community groups play an important role in delivering these events. One of the aims of the Borough Manifesto is greater community cohesion and ensuring that change in our community is resident led.

The Equality and Diversity Community Fund will allow local charities and community groups to take a greater role in delivering events related to the Equality and Diversity Calendar, creating new and engaging projects that will benefit our residents. These projects should promote social inclusion, celebrate diversity, and support equality through providing opportunities for people with protected characteristics. www.lbdd.gov.uk/equality-and-diversity.

NATIONAL EVENTS AND RESOURCES

Interfaith Week

Each year, Inter Faith Week begins on Remembrance Sunday. It highlights the good work done by local inter faith and faith-based groups and encourages groups to hold events that celebrates diversity and commonality. www.interfaithweek.org

Visit my Mosque

Visit My Mosque day is a national initiative facilitated by the Muslim Council of Britain encouraging 250+ mosques across the UK to hold open days to welcome in their neighbours from all faiths and none and build bridges across communities. www.visitmymosque.org

Mitzvah Day

Mitzvah Day introduces people to social action, to their neighbours and to local charities. Jewish led, we bring together people of all faiths and backgrounds, to volunteer side by side, building longstanding, genuine relationships. www.mitzvahday.org.uk

Sewa Day

Sewa Day is an international day of volunteering, inspired by the concept of selfless service. By participating in this collective endeavour of volunteering, we hope that acts of kindness and public service are performed more often. www.sewaday.org

The Great Get Together

The Great Get Together is inspired by Jo Cox MP, who was killed on 16 June 2016. On 16 June each year, we ask people to celebrate Jo's belief that community makes us by connecting with others and showing the power we have together. www.greatgettogether.org

FURTHER SUPPORT

The Faith & Belief Forum

As a project celebrated at the London Faith and Belief Community Awards you now gain access to a network of 200+ expert projects. To encourage and maintain the relationships, F&BF have created events and workshops exclusively for this network.

www.faithbeliefforum.org/awards

Interfaith Week

The Interfaith Network provides opportunities for linking and sharing of good practice, providing advice and information to help the development of new inter faith initiatives and the strengthening of existing ones. www.interfaith.org.uk

Near Neighbours

Near Neighbours offer small funding grants to community projects and local groups developing relationships and improving communities. They can also provide support in writing grant bids, interfaith ideas and project planning.

www.near-neighbours.org.uk/start-a-project

