



FAITH BUILDS
COMMUNITY

**WORKING
TOGETHER
IN BARKING
& DAGENHAM**

PART 2: ENGAGEMENT REPORT

**The
Faith
& Belief
Forum**

Formerly 3FF (Three Faiths Forum)



**Barking &
Dagenham**





ENGAGEMENT REPORT – FAITH COMMUNITIES

For engagement with faith groups, the Faith & Belief Forum conducted extensive consultation during the period November 2018 to May 2019 through an online survey, face-to-face meetings with faith leaders and people of faith from different faith groups, consultation meetings with community organisations that support faith groups, hosting three focus group workshops, and attending existing community events and meetings. Diversity was prioritised throughout the consultation, both in terms of faith groups and diversity within faiths.

- 51 online surveys completed by residents from diverse faith backgrounds: 51% Christian; 20% do not identify with a faith / not disclosed; 18% Muslim; 2% Pagan; 2% Sikh. 51% White; 24% Black; 18% Asian; 2% Mixed; 6% not specified.
- 40 consultation meetings with local faith leaders: 72% Christian; 13% Muslim; 3% Sikh; 3% Hindu; 3% Jain; 3% Buddhist; 3% Jewish.
- 5 consultation meetings with community organisations that support faith groups. This included an arts-based organisation, a network meeting for faith leaders, and a group of community leaders meeting to address knife crime

Survey responses, as well as each conversation we had with faith leaders and community organisations were rich, sometimes tense, often lengthy and always passionate. Yet more data came from residents' views shared at the Big Conversation events in 2017, and wider meetings we attended in the local community.

This section summarises key themes that recurred in the engagement and were felt strongly by multiple faith and belief groups in the borough. Each theme is illustrated with quotes from local faith and belief groups. Each theme concludes with a 'Future Hopes' section summarising some of the thoughts, beliefs and feelings groups expressed about the future, which go on to inform the Action Plan. It has not been possible to reflect every opinion heard during the engagement, but the authors feel this is a fair summary.

CELEBRATING FAITH BASED SOCIAL ACTION



“I do think the Council could be and need to be more aware of the positive work of faith groups. It is my understanding that some in the Council think that faith groups are very narrow in their reach and their work is exclusively delivered to those within their community. This view I question but even if it were the case, faith groups are still supporting and benefitting the lives of Barking and Dagenham residents – something to be celebrated”

Current Situation

Faith groups run numerous community projects that address the needs of wider society i.e. welcoming refugees, supporting victims of domestic violence, running foodbanks and shelters, fundraising for health and wellbeing charities, encouraging and running sports activities, youth activities, campaigning against knife crime. Almost every faith group consulted is doing some kind of community work, and many are running a multitude of different projects, all resourced by local volunteers. While some groups are positively collaborating with the Council on these initiatives, others feel that they are doing this work in isolation and would like more recognition.

Attitudes towards funding differed. Some groups spoke about specific needs of their social action project e.g. wanting to add a shower facility to their foodbank and asked if this was something the Council could help fund. Others were concerned about what stipulations Council funding would come with or wanted signposting to funding that would not require them to strip out the faith element of their work.

Many faith groups mentioned that social action was where they interacted beyond their own community. Other groups reflected that where their social action was ostensibly open to everyone it was generally taken up by people from their own faith community. They wanted support to think about how to change this. E.g. One mosque running English, Math and Life skills classes for women recognise that a local Eastern European

community would benefit from this work, but they aren't sure how to go about making the link.

There were also examples of events and initiatives that faith groups are organising, that would provide good opportunities for collaboration with the Council. For example, a local church leader shared how his networks put together an honours list of influential black people in the borough, which included faith leaders, during Black History Month and host an awards ceremony.

Future Hopes

- Many groups would like recognition from the Council for the community work that they're doing
- Some groups asked for financial support for social action, others asked for signposting to 'faith-friendly' funders.

Groups suggested that the Council could play a role in linking up faith based social action across the borough, particularly groups working on the same issues that might be able to advise and train each other.

RESPONDING TO HATE CRIME AND PREJUDICE

Current Situation

There is consensus amongst faith groups that there should be a zero tolerance approach to hate crime. Most faith groups we spoke to said that they hadn't directly experienced hate crime, but those that had were disproportionately Muslim. There was a feeling from many faith groups that there is not a particular problem with hate crime in Barking and Dagenham although community tensions were referred to much more regularly. Examples from Muslim groups also suggest underreporting of faith based hate crime may be an issue.

One unreported Islamophobic hate crime was referenced off hand in a council meeting by a community member. Council staff were able to follow up and ensure the incident was reported, but this suggests similar incidents may occur. Another Muslim group spoke about two Islamophobic incidents their members had experienced, one which included threat to life, that had been categorised as 'anti-social behaviour' or a 'mental health episode' rather than a faith based hate crime. They felt this was wrong and that it had discouraged others from reporting. Others were able to reference an incident they had heard happen to someone else (for example a hate crime on a Sikh who was mistaken for a Muslim).

In terms of reporting, some faith groups said that there this is not a lot of information available about hate crime. Groups are aware that hate crime could be reported to the police, but asked who the best person in the Council is to speak to for advice before reporting. Some Muslim groups said their members would prefer to report to Muslim-based third party groups rather than the police.

While fewer groups referred to specific hate crimes, many more faith groups talked about tensions between local residents of different backgrounds, not always feeling welcome in their local communities and having to go out of their way to dispel stereotypes and negative perceptions. Others mentioned seeing hurtful and hateful comments in local forums online or spoke about a 'tolerance' of racism existing in the local community. Particularly, many participants shared that they have experienced people who hold stereotypes and who don't understand religious customs and dress, for example one person commented 'being a woman wearing a headscarf is very challenging'. These experiences were voiced by Muslim, Sikh and Christian groups showing that a problem exists across faiths. A few groups mentioned a perception that there was particular fear and tension between white communities and Muslims or Christians and Muslims. Groups seemed much less clear about how to respond to these kinds of incidents, and weren't sure what should be reported. Some had gone out of their way to take action at a local level e.g. a church that experienced tensions with local residents and did community events, fun days and social action in the local area in order to actively try and change perceptions.

"I have lived in the borough for 56 years and never experienced a hate crime, but I have experienced people's lack of understanding in regards to religious customs."

Future Hopes

- Faith groups said they would like more information and education on what hate crime is, how many occur in Barking and Dagenham, and advice on reporting and the police process.
- Groups suggested that a trusted individual could be trained up in each faith community to be able to provide advice about reporting, and could act as a go between the reporting bodies and their community.
- Several groups raised that when a faith-based hate crime does occur, it is important that there is a timely shared response from different faith groups, showing interfaith solidarity with the affected community. This could be led by the Faith Forum.
- Some groups suggested more discussions, events and sharing about religious ritual, practice and dress. These could lessen stereotypes and build understanding.
- A joint project between faith groups going into local schools to break down stereotypes about faith.

"Hate Crime is an issue for our community and as a Faith Leader I'll do whatever I can to protect and support my community"

ACCESSING SPACE AND BUILDINGS

Current Situation

In the CAG report, a wide range of needs for space or facilities were identified. There is a need for additional space for faith groups, particularly for Muslim groups and for Christian groups outside the traditional denominations. This need is driven by growing numbers of attendees but also by the expanding range of community activities in which these groups are engaged. Hindu and Jain groups in the borough also need space as neither of these groups have their own dedicated facility.

50 percent of groups contacted through the CAG report study who need additional space expressed a preference to purchase or extend an existing building, with only nine percent preferring a new-build facility.

Our engagement showed that there is recognition from some groups that the Council are good to them in terms of reduced rates for their buildings.

Groups were also aware of issues around noise and parking and the impact on local communities. Some groups commented that they wished their buildings could be in a quieter place so they could feel more sacred. Some groups talked about the

importance of being aware of their neighbours and how balancing their worship needs with the needs of their neighbours was a challenge. Others asked that their neighbours be more considerate of their needs, or suggested that noise/parking complaints may be examples of veiled racism or anti faith sentiment. Several Muslim groups said that parking and issues around space are a particular problem in Ramadan.

Many groups brought up the idea of shared space. Significant concern was expressed about how interfaith spaces would work. Whilst intrafaith shared spaces were workable faith communities are clear on the practical challenges of making shared spaces for worship work.

That does not mean that faith groups were not willing to open their doors to each other, and faith communities were positive about shared uses for community activities in particular community halls and hubs.

In addition some community leaders expressed concern about a lack of housing for larger families, with some families in their congregation moving out of the borough.

“When we moved to the Church, we saw that 95% of the time the building was empty, and this was a misuse of what God had provided us. We opened the Church to be a shelter twice a week, and then a foodbank came looking for a new home, an act of God! and we now house the foodbank. Three other churches and music classes now use our building too”

Past Experience

People cited examples where faith groups share community buildings, a model that is already working well, for example a Muslim group using a community hall on Fridays and a Christian group using the same space on a Sunday.

There were numerous examples of groups from the same religion sharing spaces – sometimes up to 5 congregations in one space. This often leads to shared activities like an annual community day. For example, one place of worship hosts a Chinese Church, two African Churches and a Seventh Day Adventist Church. The opportunity for significant intercultural and intrafaith mixing should not be missed.

For some groups, lack of space was a constant worry. Often worshippers had to pray on the street and lack of washing facilities was also a problem. In addition, lack of funeral facilities was an issue. Some groups found it hard to perform regular religious rituals due to not having a venue in their locality and expressed frustration that they weren't able to buy more space even when they had the money to afford it, due to planning permission

Many groups referred to the need for buildings to be shared out fairly. Sometimes faith groups said they feel like they are in competition with each other for space e.g. for planning permission to extend or build new premises. Groups openly talked about feelings of resentment if they had planning permission denied, and then saw another faith group building in the local area. Groups stressed the importance of transparency of council decision-making related to planning decisions, fairness and equal access.

Future Hopes

- The Council demonstrate transparent decision making related to planning decisions, fairness and equal access
- Simpler guidance on setting up a new place of worship, and clarity around expectations from the Council
- Different needs of faith groups reflected in decision making around planning and opening hours
- Faith groups are included in any future planning consultations e.g. around new building developments
- More faith groups sharing non worship space such as community space and parking facilities

SAFEGUARDING VULNERABLE PEOPLE

Current Situation

The majority of faith groups had an understanding of safeguarding requirements. DBS checks and Safeguarding Policies were particularly referenced. However, many groups are unsure exactly what was expected of them from the Council and didn't know where to look to get more information. Not all groups had their own Safeguarding Policy in place. In general, faith groups that are part of an established national denomination had more support with safeguarding. Indeed, one Church of England church commented that they hadn't considered that the Council could support on Safeguarding, because they know where to get resources and templates through their denomination. But not all groups have this support. Several Muslim groups referenced working with Faith Associates, such as a positive experience of creating a Safeguarding Policy with them. However, it should also be noted that not all Muslim groups are currently working with Faith Associates.

There was a concern for several Muslim groups that safeguarding policies would be particularly targeted at Muslims. More widely, faith groups recognised that there is a current focus on safeguarding from the Council. While groups recognise that safeguarding is important and needed, they asked that this work is done alongside addressing faith groups other needs. They shared that it would go down badly if the Council are seen to be primarily engaging with faith groups for safeguarding reasons without a wider focus on other needs.

In general, it was the smaller, and more independent places of worship that had less access to safeguarding support. One group stated that they relied on the professional expertise of members of their community to lead on safeguarding. Others asked if the Council could help with DBS checks and training volunteers.

Past Experience

People cited examples where faith groups share One person raised a concern about vulnerable people being drawn into religious groups that claim to cure cancer.

Some Muslim groups spoke about how they felt hurt, targeted and monitored by Prevent. They spoke about feelings of isolation and poor relationships between Muslims and the Council because of the way safeguarding is handled. Other Muslim groups said they didn't have a problem with Prevent as long as it was implemented fairly and correctly.

They were lots of negative comments related to safeguarding, and particularly a fear from some groups that safeguarding would result in the Council shutting things down and 'stop anything that doesn't fit with their view', rather than an understanding that safeguarding is about working together to protect vulnerable people.

Future Hopes

- Several groups stated that clear and accessible online safeguarding advice from the Council, which makes the requirements of faith groups really clear, would be a useful outcome of the policy.
- Groups wanted to be better informed about who they could speak to locally for safeguarding advice
- Several Muslim groups asked that all safeguarding work includes everyone and does not target one faith in particular.
- Groups asked that if the Council have concerns about safeguarding, they should speak to faith groups directly, as it needs to be a conversation.
- Groups stressed the importance of the Council working with faith groups on safeguarding in a transparent way and stressed the role of the Council in keeping people informed.

“With safeguarding and hate crime it can be so sensitive. It's really important that people have someone they can speak to who they know and trust”

RESPECTING DIFFERENT FAITHS AND THE INDIVIDUALITY OF GROUPS



“There should be rights for all groups to hold their beliefs and not be penalised for holding a conservative view. Just because we hold these views doesn’t mean we don’t love and respect others who hold a different view.”

Faith groups in Barking and Dagenham clearly do hold very different views and practice their faiths in very different ways. Groups ranged from holding very socially conservative to very socially progressive views. Often within individual faith groups, there were huge differences of opinion on social issues, and several faith leaders mentioned that it was difficult to represent their whole group when views differed within their members.

Some groups spoke about wanting to be understood as individuals, or as an individual faith group, rather than collectively as faith groups in general. They felt there is often a perception in society that all faith groups have the same needs, and asked for recognition that the needs of individual faith groups are often different and specific.

Some groups went further than this, several Christian groups talked about how they perceived there to be a tension between the religious and the secular. They talked about a lack of understanding about how their lives are inspired by faith, or a feeling that faith is being sidelined. They cited examples of having to strip the faith out of their work in order to receive funding for social action as an example of ‘anti-Christian bias’ One Christian group said a Council staff member said ‘you don’t really believe what’s written in those books do you?’. Groups were keen to interact in spaces where they felt comfortable to express their Christian identity. Sometimes this was about having the freedom to hold socially conservative views, but other times it was more about feeling comfortable to talk about how their lives are inspired by faith.

In contrast other faith groups were keen to work against the idea that faith groups always held conservative views. Many groups are proud of the women who held leadership positions in their organisations, and several spoke about working towards a future with more women in leadership positions.

Groups also held contrasting views about LGBT issues, some expressed personal concerns, while others talked about wanting more work to ensure places of worship were inclusive for LGBT people. Similarly, some groups saw the need for women only spaces where others did not.

While views differed, there was consensus around working together as a community under a vision of love and respect. Many groups reinforced the idea that it was important to love and respect everyone, including those that you had very different opinions from.

Future Hopes

- More events where the Council and faith communities collaborate like the Community Carols and Eid at Eastbury that celebrate faith and encourage people of faith to feel comfortable expressing their faith identities publicly in the borough
- Ensuring a range of events and opportunities are on offer that cater for different needs and Council spaces are faith friendly
- More community projects that celebrate individuality and raise up individual voices of people of faith
- Council and faith groups working together under a vision of love and respect
- Groups stressed the importance of the Council working with faith groups on safeguarding in a transparent way and stressed the role of the Council in keeping people informed.

FAITHS WORKING TOGETHER

Current Situation

Many of the positive examples of interfaith work happening in the borough are those of an informal nature e.g. a Muslim couple volunteering at a local church lunch club. Such examples were frequent and even those respondents who were very sceptical about working with other faiths talked positively about such instances. Everyone we spoke to mentioned projects run by faith groups from homelessness and elderly support to community fetes that were open to all. Although some seemed more successful than others at genuinely drawing in other communities

In terms of more formal or intentional interfaith events lots of groups referred to the Faith Forum and several mentioned a mosque and a church in Becontree that had held a series of interfaith discussions. People were aware of and positive about the Faith Forum and often referenced events they had been to, some spanning back to previous decades. There was less knowledge of current work, but some groups were really enthusiastic and talked about the trust they had in the individuals on the Faith Forum. One concern was raised about the Faith Forum's use of shared prayer, where a Christian group stated they did not feel comfortable praying with people from other faiths. At present there are no larger scale, sustained interfaith initiatives

A lot of groups stressed the importance of social action run by faith groups being non-denominational and clear that it is open to everyone. Larger groups talked about setting up Community Interest Companies or gaining charitable status for their community work, whereas for smaller groups focussed more on an open approach. This was seen as simultaneously important for funding and to build a more connected community. Several large-scale operations in the borough like Lifeline, Harmony House, Kingsley Hall, Al Madina have infrastructure and staff. There are many other grassroots operations that may be less recognised.

Several groups who run successful social action said they'd be happy to train other faith groups in their methodology.

Several minority faith groups mentioned that schools and other groups like to engage with them in a 'limited' way – a tour, an assembly, a school visit to a place of worship. These faith groups believed this kind of engagement was a good start but that it rarely results in sustained engagement or shared action. They felt like there was a need for something deeper.

“Working with others can be challenging but we can come together around social issues if not spiritual issues”

Past Experience

Some groups questioned whether an overt focus on interfaith would put people off engaging and people talked of being weary of 'interfaith for interfaith's sake' or being uncertain about the aims. There were concerns around this leading to enforced places for shared worship. Others were positive about interfaith and wanted to see more.

People who were less open to overt interfaith talked more positively about 'working alongside' people from other faiths, or being friends with people from other faiths. To our understanding this is interfaith, but it's important to understand how language may affect group's likelihood to engage.

A few groups were extremely wary of other faiths, talked about 'cultural barriers', feeling 'uncomfortable' or worried that engaging would lead to attempts at conversion.

Groups were concerned that conversation or talking was limited, and working together for the community and service delivery were more useful. However, some people talked about not knowing how to get started. Others mentioned failed attempts at interfaith work and bad experiences of approaching other faiths. One group asked for advice about 'interfaith friendly' groups to approach.

Future Hopes

- Groups asked for a policy to provide practical recommendations of how groups could work together and engage with one another. For example, a directory could identify interested groups and encourage collaboration.
- Groups were positive about this consultation signifying a priority from the Council to encourage more working together, and were keen to get started
- A gap for a larger scale interfaith event was identified
- The Faith Forum expressed their enthusiasm for leading on a social action project based on a shared area of concern

PROMOTING DIVERSE VOICES

Current Situation

The perception and knowledge of how the Council works with faith and belief differs from group to group. When faith groups referred to 'the Council' this variously referred to Local Councillors, particular individuals within the Participation and Engagement Team, the wider Council team and even local MPs. Where these different actors operate on different streams of work and are understood separately within the Council, these distinctions are not necessarily understood by faith groups.

Faith groups recognised that there was a lot of potential for working with the Council more closely, but that this potential is not always realised. Some groups already work closely with the Council, use Council space or have a personal relationship with someone in the Council. Others have little or no interaction.

Past Experience

Positive examples of interactions with the Council that faith groups referenced included the work of the Faith Forum historically, members of Council staff attending and supporting faith-based events and festivals and Council-run trainings and workshops. Groups also talked positively about times where a member of Council staff came to visit them at their place of worship. Some faith groups spoke about a positive relationship with a particular local Councillor, that built trust between that faith group and the Council. Several faith leaders also mentioned that they had noticed an increase in emphasis for the Council on faith recently, referencing new work with the Faith Forum, or the new funding for the interfaith project, and stated that they were interested in what will happen next.

Groups saw the Council and Faith Forum as a connector and bridge builder, that could help them find out about what other faith groups are doing.

A key frustration around interaction with the Council, raised by faith groups, was the lack of consistency from the Council in faith engagement work over time. A lot of groups with a history in the borough noted how the Council previously worked with faith groups more significantly and that there was historically more interaction between faith groups and Council staff. Groups were aware that this engagement had decreased and was now increasing again. Faith groups questioned the reasons for these changes and were not aware of the context around Council funding cuts in 2010. Groups emphasised the need for consistent support and wanted to know more about the Council's motivations for faith engagement work.

“It’s positive that the Council are wanting to do more on faith. They haven’t always got it right in the past, for example with the support of the Faith Forum, but I got involved because I respect and trust the people on the Faith Forum”

Some groups raised concerns about too much consultation, and less resulting action. They asked that actions and results from consultations are implemented and clearly communicated with those that took part. Others raised concerns about whether they were being monitored.

There was also a perception mentioned that certain faith groups 'have the ear of the Council' or are 'preferred' to others. This was sometimes linked to who was invited to speak at events or work which was perceived to receive more recognition. Groups consistently asked for transparency, neutrality and a lack of bias. Some groups referenced a previous negative event, e.g. the Council shutting down a church led foodbank and suggested reparations, such as talks or an apology, were needed for them to be willing to work with the Council again.

Future Hopes

- Consistency in the support available from the Council for faith groups
- Clear and accessible guidance from the Council to be given in simple language. A section on the Council website that draws together all the support, advice and requirements for faith groups in one place
- A directory of local faith groups, detailing what they do, with the Council and Faith Forum as a connector and bridge builder.
- A designated staff member who builds relationships and trust with faith groups, signposts, connects groups and facilitates collaboration
- More diverse range of faith groups working closely with the Council
- A variety of different faith groups involved in Council events, invited to speak or sit on committees.

B

ENGAGEMENT REPORT – LBBD COUNCIL



Engagement was carried out with council departments over five months, including those officers who work directly with faith communities in different capacities. Staff represented a wide range of different teams, including: Participation and Engagement; Equalities; Assets; Cultural Policy and Participation; Safeguarding; Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women and Girls. More extensive engagement took place between the Faith & Belief Forum and the Participation and Engagement team, who met to share their expertise ten times between November 2018 and May 2019.

Input from Council staff was varied depending on their role, but many Council staff highlighted the huge positive impact of faith communities in general, and places of worship specifically, on residents of many different backgrounds. Multiple Council staff were proud of the historic good relationship between the Council and Barking and Dagenham Faith Forum, and that the Council had recently commissioned the 22-month Faith in Barking and Dagenham project.

This section summarises key themes that emerged from conversations between the Faith & Belief Forum and Council staff. The focus of the overall engagement was with the community and although council engagement is summarised for four themes below, the council broadly supports all of the themes. For further information on the council's support, please see the associated strategies and policies as outlined below.

How the policy fits with other Council initiatives

This document fits into a range of local work to increase community participation and facilitated partnership between the Council and local community groups. In response to the challenges mentioned above, the Council has taken significant steps to engage with diversity, address inequality and increase participation of local communities, including faith groups.

The Growth Commission of 2016 brought together a team of independent experts to review potential for economic growth and to make recommendations for generating growth in a way that benefits all borough residents. The Commission offered over 100 recommendations, including:

- A commitment that no-one, and no ethnic group, is left behind, and that the Council will support every person and every family to fulfil their potential, through education, work and, where needed, social support.
- A renewal of the civic culture through the development of a vibrant community with high levels of volunteering, organised and empowered to underpin, support and challenge the public and private sectors.
- The Council commits itself to doing everything in its power to ensure that the burden of fulfilling the vision will be borne by those best placed to do so, with the community and business, as well as the Council and other public sector organisations, each playing an appropriate leading role.

The recommendations of the Growth Commission led to The Borough Manifesto, a 20-year plan for the future of Barking and Dagenham created in consultation with over 3,000 residents. The vision for the manifesto is 'one borough; one community; no-one left behind'. The manifesto is a set of aspirations and targets, jointly owned by public, private, community and voluntary sector organisations, all of which will need help and support from a range of organisations (including faith groups), and the local community, if they are to be successful.

In order to understand and address inequality in the borough, the Council adopted an updated Equality and Diversity Strategy in 2017, with a vision 'to create a place where people understand, respect and celebrate each other's differences; a place where tolerance, understanding and a sense of responsibility can grow and all people can enjoy full equality and fulfil their potential'. The Council also developed a Gender Equality Charter in 2016 (the first local Council to adopt such a charter in the country), with over 150 businesses, organisations and individuals signed up thus far. iv Faith groups are a core part of both the strategy and the Charter.

The Council created a Corporate Plan for 2018-2022 to set key themes and priorities. Some of these priorities which relate to faith groups are:

- Develop place-based partnerships
- Enable greater independence and protect the most vulnerable
- Harness culture and increase opportunity
- Encourage civic pride and social responsibility
- Strengthen partnerships, participation and a place-based approach

The Council has supported the development of major projects to increase civic engagement and participation required by the Manifesto and the Corporate Plan. Five strategies/projects particularly relevant to faith groups are:

- The Cohesion and Integration Strategy 2019 – 2024 sets the foundation for achieving the vision set out in the Borough Manifesto by reinforcing the links that keep and bring people together, across, opinions and beliefs, culture, ethnicity, age, and gender, and to ensure that no one is left behind. The Strategy has five priorities: 1) to increase the opportunities for people from different background to meet and interact, 2) to celebrate our culture, heritage and cultural diversity, 3) to help all residents to integrate in our community, 4) to listen better, and 5) to create new and better jobs accessible to all and ensure a fair distribution of the benefits of regeneration across the borough.
- The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE) Strategy 2019 sets a four-year vision to strengthen the VCSE sector (including small community groups running street parties, through online communities, faith communities, as well as large borough-based and national charities). The strategy champions a healthy, independent and influential VCSE working in our community for the benefit of all through achieving three goals: 1) increasing participation, 2) enabling and embedding relationships based on trust; and 3) building the sector's capacity.
- Connected Communities is a £1.4million programme to a) generate insights into the change needed to improve social cohesion locally; b) directly improve social cohesion; c) mitigate the impacts of high levels of demographic change on services.
- Every One, Every Day works with residents across the borough to create over 250 neighbourhood-led projects and form more than 100 new businesses over the next five years. As part of the initiative, residents share ideas for projects and community businesses they would like to create in their neighbourhoods.
- The Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy (NCIL) is part of a fee the Council charges developers who are building new housing developments in the borough. The money is set aside to specifically fund local neighbourhood projects, such as building playgrounds, environmental improvements, healthy projects or community initiatives.

RESPONDING TO HATE CRIME AND PREJUDICE

Many Council staff talked about being concerned about the high levels of prejudicial comments they see online from Barking and Dagenham residents, including towards people of faith. One staff member said that they heard from residents from faith communities that hate crime is seen as an everyday experience for some people of faith.

The 22-month Faith in Barking and Dagenham project was highlighted as an example of the investment the Council had recently made in projects which sought to address prejudices towards people of different faiths. Council staff also talked about the Council's history of standing up to racism and xenophobia in the borough as further evidence of their commitment to inclusion.

Regarding hate crime, the Mayor of London's Hate Crime Dashboard shows that in the 12 months April 2018 to March 2019, there were 26 hate crime offences related to faith in Barking and Dagenham. Notably, 25 out of 26 incidents were Islamophobic offences, showing that the Muslim community is disproportionately affected. While clearly any hate crime is a serious problem, these numbers are significantly lower than the average number of reported faith related hate crimes for a London borough, which was 68, and also lower than neighbouring boroughs to Barking and Dagenham. Although reported incidents were fairly low, local residents' perceptions of hate crime being a problem were comparatively much higher; between 13% and 20% of borough residents reported feeling that "Hate Crime is a problem in their area".

In terms of reporting, Council staff talked about individual residents informally reporting hate crimes to trusted Council staff which hadn't been reported elsewhere. Staff talked about the need to ensure communities are knowledgeable about what a hate crime is and reporting routes, as well as who they can consult to talk through incidents.

Future Hopes

- Faith communities are knowledgeable about hate crimes and how to report them
- Local projects exist which break down prejudice towards people of different faiths

"We want to send the message that the Council views this as unacceptable and that we will not tolerate hate crime on any level"

ACCESSING SPACE AND BUILDINGS

Numerous Council staff mentioned that there is high demand for council premises in the borough, including buildings for use as places of worship. This is evidenced by the 2017 CAG report.

Council staff stated that some faith groups use Council premises, usually in a shared capacity. When this is the case, there is a lease agreement which clearly lays out conditions of use such as payment of rent on time, keeping the premises in good repair and condition, and not using the premises for any purpose than the permitted use. Staff noted that there have been examples of faith groups breaching the conditions of their lease and then the Council having to intervene. Some staff felt that there needed to be discussions about how to deal with such situations in the future.

Beyond Council assets, the Council also have the discretionary power to grant relief from rates on any properly used by registered charities and other non-profit making organisations, including faith-based organisations, on top of the standard 80% relief offered to all registered charities. However, the Council do not grant 100% relief to "buildings used solely or mainly for the use of religious purposes". Decisions about relief from rates is made on a case-by-case basis, but requests are most likely to be approved when faith-based organisations pursue projects that impact the wider LBBDD community, not solely their own faith community.

Regarding planning permission, staff stated that they had heard a misunderstanding from some people of faith that faith groups are in competition for planning permission. They stressed that this is not the case as all applications are considered separately.

Future Hopes

- Faith-based organisations are aware of their responsibilities as laid out in their lease and are supported to fulfil them
- Faith-based organisations are made aware that they are most likely to be granted 100% rates relief if they use their buildings to pursue projects that impact the wider LBBDD community, beyond their own faith community

"We want faith-based organisations to help us create a sense of shared responsibility when it comes to engaging with and creating opportunities for the wider community"

SAFEGUARDING VULNERABLE PEOPLE

Many Council staff mentioned that faith leaders and places of worship engage with residents of different ages and backgrounds, and as such should be supported in their well-placed capacity to safeguard children and vulnerable adults.

All faith groups, formal and informal, that engage with children and vulnerable adults should fulfil the following basic safeguarding requirements: they should have a Safeguarding Policy relevant to their organisation and the scope of their work; they should nominate a designated Safeguarding Lead; volunteers and staff whose roles requires it should have a DBS check which the Safeguarding Lead should assess for suitability for the role.

To support with the above, faith groups may wish to participate in training, either online or in person, from a relevant organisation (see Appendix 2c below). Staff agreed that they would like to make it as easy as possible for faith groups to access training in this area. One team mentioned that their team could apply for funding for training for Safeguarding Leads from faith groups, but they could only do this if there was enough interest from faith groups. Multiple staff talked about the possibility of working towards a downloadable toolkit for faith-based organisations to help them create their own Safeguarding Policy.

The Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women and Girls team talked about wanting to support faith communities with safeguarding women and girls. They talked about wanting to continue to partner with faith groups: advising faith leaders on issues, supporting faith groups to get involved with wellness and activism, and visiting places of worship to run drop in sessions.

Future Hopes

- The Council support faith groups to access training so that they can create policies appropriate for their setting
- All faith groups who engage with children adopt a Safeguarding Policy and nominate a Safeguarding Lead
- The Council and faith groups work in partnership when it comes to safeguarding, with the Council visiting places of worship to run drop-in sessions or to promote opportunities for residents

“Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults is something that all of us have a duty to uphold”

PROMOTING DIVERSE VOICES

Events organised by the Council are wide-ranging. There are ten annually recurring events which range from Holocaust Memorial Day to Roundhouse Music Festival to Youth Paradexiv. These events already involve local communities and provide excellent opportunities for work with faith groups and people of faith.

The Equalities and Cultural Policy and Participation spoke about their interest in focusing on intersectionality, bringing the voices of people of faith into events they organise about other characteristics. Examples given were including people of faith in celebrations of Pride and Black History Month. Some staff talked about wanting training and advice themselves around faith and intersections with other characteristics.

Staff also spoke about their role in encouraging faith groups to organise their own events, and helping to build support for events being run in the community.

Staff spoke about faith as an important aspect of some residents' cultures, and that faith and culture can be interlinked. Some staff said there is opportunity for more cultural heritage programming related to faith and belief in the borough that could be co-created with faith communities. Staff talked about the limitations of one day events for faith groups compared with ongoing programming in collaboration with faith groups. They also spoke about the sensitivities of marking cultural and faith events. Again, partnership with faith groups was emphasised as the most effective way for genuine and authentic reflection of the interests of people of faith.

Future Hopes

- There are increased numbers of partnerships between Council teams and faith groups for planning events
- Council Equalities events are intersectional and bring in the experiences of people of faith
- Faith groups are encouraged by Council staff to organise their own events, and these are promoted by the Council
- Council staff feel better equipped to promote diverse voices through increased faith awareness

“Faith groups are an amazing resource and the Council should think more about how to harness this”



**Barking &
Dagenham**

