

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 October 2023

Title: Working with Faith Communities in Barking and Dagenham – Action Plan and reporting template	
Report of the Director of Community Participation & Prevention	
Open Report	For Information
Wards Affected: All	Key Decision: No
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Accountable Director: Rhodri Rowlands, Director of Community Participation and Prevention	
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Summary	
<p>Barking and Dagenham is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse communities in London and has seen rapid changes in both the demographic of the place and its landscape and make up. One of the characteristics of Barking & Dagenham is its vibrant and rich diversity of faiths and beliefs and the positive contribution those faith communities make locally.</p> <p>People of faith make up a significant and growing part of our community, with over 75% of residents identifying that they have a faith. As the community changes, our faith communities have changed with them and with this has come a significant demand for space, resources and support. Faith communities provide a vital and positive role supporting people most in need, strengthening resilience, reinforcing local identity and helping to connect communities.</p> <p>Faith organisations are regularly and increasingly working outside of their “traditional” functions, becoming real hubs for community activity, social action, delivering essential services to the most vulnerable people in our communities. In addition to this, they are frequently applying for and utilising funding opportunities, to deliver programme supporting (alongside the usual pastoral and spiritual guidance) food supply and access, counselling, warm spaces, befriending or relief from loneliness, sports and social activities, debt and budget advice, early years provision, youth programmes and refugee/asylum seeker support.</p> <p>We have gained traction and momentum over the past few years, in coordinating the response to the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis and faith organisations can continue to play a key strategic role in helping the council to achieve its ambitions for residents. Whilst reflecting on the positive progress that has been achieved, we have also kept in mind that there are challenges still to be addressed. We know that some of the tensions in our communities continue to be focused on some of our growing faith communities and places of religious worship, alongside other issues like;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- access to spaces and buildings for worship- perceived differences between treatment of religious groups	

- tensions around issues such as parking and noise
- concerns centred around cultural and religious practices
- safeguarding within our communities
- addressing the wider context of health and health inequalities.

The borough has a strong history of community engagement and our faith-based organisations, small and large, play vital roles in this. However, it remains the case that not all faith organisations wish to engage with the Council (or statutory partners), or through the current structures and forums in place through which organisations may otherwise be engaged and involved. To this end, we have worked hard over the past 8 months to forge a new delivery focused partnership between faith leaders, in a coordinated effort to increase dialogue and shared action between different organisations. The newly established Faith Leaders Network has been a network under the BD_Collective since March and is working to address local unmet need and increase coordination between the member faith organisations. Currently the network has 18 members, supported by Faith Action (a local charity, who work under the banner of Lifeline church) and plans to expand to thirty members by the end of the financial year.

Continued, coordinated effort is needed to ensure that statutory partners and services are on hand to offer advice and guidance, support and opportunities to faith organisations to keep them involved and current, and that we use all available means of doing this. This has been provided in many forms from the Council, not just with the establishment of the new network. Faith organisations are continuing to benefit from stronger relationships with many departments in the council, including Public Health, Community Safety, Safeguarding, Events, Community Solutions and Participation & Engagement to name a few. The Engagement Champions programme has increased officers ability to undertake expert engagement and participation practice across many workstreams, however it is important that we take the opportunity to continue to learn more about our faith communities, continuing to grow our partnerships and build strong relationships and establish trust and reach with faith leaders.

To ensure we maintain the momentum gained over the past few years, we have built a multi-phased action plan, which directly links to the principles and themes explored in the Faith Builds Community Policy and looks to strengthen and maintain the progress we have made so far.

Recommendation(s)

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- (i) Note the progress from the Overview and Scrutiny review of faith engagement in February 2023.
- (ii) Review the high-level action plan and recommend any changes or additions (see Appendix 1).
- (iii) Note high-level progress made to establish the Faith Leaders Network and suggest further ways we could work together to deliver the actions in the plan; and
- (iv) Meet with representatives from the Faith Leaders Network, to hear more about the experiences of faith leaders in Barking & Dagenham. Officers will work with Governance Services to explore options to make this work following the presentation of the action plan.

1. Introduction and Background

- 1.1. Following the Overview and Scrutiny meeting in February, officers have brought together a proposal of a phased action plan (Appendix 1), which seeks to meet the cross-cutting themes outlined in the Faith Builds Community Policy and further strengthen our commitment to working with faith communities in Barking & Dagenham.
- 1.2. Working with faith communities to deliver the faith engagement action plan (see Appendix 1) is going to take the collective power of the council. The work, whilst being coordinated by the Participation & Engagement team, sits across multiple departments and will take the collective resources of those departments to deliver. We have worked to coordinate these actions and to ensure that the right contact points are utilised within the organisation to enable action to take place.
- 1.3. The proposed plan is phased over a number of delivery periods, with an iterative approach taken to ensure that we can deliver a number of immediate, medium and long-term goals for faith communities over the next 2-3 years. Whilst much work has been undertaken already to support faith communities, we will coordinate work around a number of phases over the course of the next 18 months.
- 1.4. The first three delivery phases cover this period and much of the work will be delivered during this time. Phases four and five have multiple overlapping actions, which refer to our ongoing commitment to supporting faith partners. The aim is to continue to develop actions which can be inserted into phases four and five, as we journey through the workstream and engage with more groups.

Actions

Action	What/Why
Work with faith organisations to review and refresh the Faith Builds Community Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Further consolidate and strengthen its principles.- Extend its reach through more pledges to follow it.- Continue to demonstrate its influence and impact.- Update shared actions and commitments.
Re-focus and prioritise how we work together on a small number of themes and facilitate wide engagement to inform the development of actions to deliver these	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Cost of living crisis – together providing help and support.- Community safeguarding – keeping people safe and promoting their wellbeing and welfare in our communities.- Health inequalities – enable and empower faith communities to further contribute to improving health and tackling health inequalities.- Place-shaping – strengthen faith engagement in respect of place-shaping and development of inclusive growth aims.
Progress the development of specific guidance and principles on how faith groups access and use appropriate spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Ensuring that this recognises the differences between and within faith groups – doing so in collaboration with faith organisations and drawing on good practice and examples where these exist.

Embed working with faith communities in Council's Corporate Plan, key supporting strategies and service plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make sure that all services are aware of, and able to, connect and engage with faith groups to understand and enhance their contribution to achieving priorities.
Invite faith groups to give awareness training to LBBDD staff to help promote inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raise awareness of faith communities and working with and alongside and promoting inclusion in all we do.
Develop new and creative faith-led forms of engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage and facilitate wider reach and connection across faith communities.
Consider the development or commissioning of a vehicle to coordinate engagement across faith organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue to support residents within their communities, maintain regular and strong links with statutory partners, strengthen coordination of activity

1.5. In Barking & Dagenham, faith organisations play a huge part in helping to provide services to residents. Now, more than ever before, the borough is accelerating the pace and scale of its partnerships with faith organisations and helping them play a major role in addressing some of our major challenges.

1.6. These challenges, which include things like health inequalities, social isolation, the cost-of-living crisis, food provision, are challenges that affect us all and we cannot rely on individual organisations to deliver these in isolation. More than ever before, wrap-around systems-based approaches are needed to solve issues together and the council plays a key strategic role in assisting the VCSE and faith sector to coordinate their efforts.

2. Progress

2.1. First, we have established the action plan as a phased approach with responsible officers across the council by meeting with and agreeing objectives.

2.2. Secondly, we have worked with Faith Leaders and Faith Action to establish the Faith Leaders network. Locally, we have seen a coordinated approach to solving the cost-of-living crisis, where training, food strategy, debt advice and wellbeing support have all been

offered by partnerships between a range of different community facing organisations. The localities model has continued to coordinate VCSE support, and the social infrastructure contract has meant that networks are better connected and constantly emerging as groups look to work together to solve common issues.

- 2.3. One of these networks which has emerged is the Faith Leaders Network, which formed early in the year, seeded by £40,000 from ringfenced council funding to support stronger, more connected communities using participatory budgeting methods. The initial project was to form a “Closed Collective”, comprised of faith organisations that wanted to work on shared action.
- 2.4. The newly established Faith Leaders Network is now a network under the BD_Collective since March and is working to address local unmet need and increase coordination between the member faith organisations. Currently the network has 18 members, supported by Faith Action (a local charity, who work under the banner of Lifeline church) and plans to expand to thirty members by the end of the financial year.
- 2.5. “Purpose of Establishing the Faith Leaders Network”, taken from the two-pager on establishing the network (see Appendix 2).

The purpose of establishing the Closed Collective (Faith Leaders Network) is to:

1. **Establish a strong and enabled network of Faith Leaders:** To deliver, engage, represent and advocate for the specific needs of faith communities affected by the cost-of-living crisis.
2. **To encourage a collective approach to tackling shared issues across multiple faith communities:** To use the knowledge and expertise of faith leaders, to provide strategic oversight of projects and initiatives that work across different faith communities, regardless of perceived differences, enabling *interfaith-based social action* and promoting future dialogue and cooperation on shared issues.
3. **To ensure that action leverages in additional support:** From a variety of different sources, including utilising the physical assets and support provided by the faith organisations involved e.g., buildings, volunteer networks, reach into diverse and so-called “hard-to-reach” communities, additional project work and their ability to connect and empower individuals through faith.

- 2.6. Networks like the Faith Leaders Network, only work because they can lever in additional support from existing mechanisms designed to support residents e.g. Cost of Living Alliance work from Locality Lead organisations, BD-Money and Warm Spaces. However, the network is only a small part of the overall faith landscape in Barking & Dagenham, and whilst we have plans to grow the network there will still be many organisations who have less enthusiasm to engage in this way.
- 2.7. The organisations within the network currently, vary both in size and scale, with some being able to generate more income than others through both their charitable channels (e.g. funding applications) or their donations from worshipers. It is envisaged, that the support from larger organisations ensures that smaller ones can benefit from both their experience and expertise in this respect. Whilst the council’s (and the vast majority of other funders) funding streams are always open and transparent, we cannot control or have access to the

decision making, for where organisations decide to spend income generated from donations. However, it is usually in the nature of these networks to share expertise and experience, other resources and time, which we will continue to encourage.

- 2.8. Thirdly, significant progress areas include the way that we are starting to work with Public Health, to connect faith organisations with programmes which address health inequalities. Whilst this is a new area for some groups, for others, they are well versed in trying to address health needs within their communities. We are looking to utilise the unique reach and connection to faith communities, to coproduce projects which improve access to services and information, link in with other initiatives (like the localities work), improve social connectivity, physical and mental health, improve access to local services for those at risk of being marginalised, increase awareness of and education around vaccination and local health priorities and address unmet needs in their immediate community. Funding from Public Health has been agreed to progress this, and up to £5k will be available to groups, to co-produce acute initiatives, with realistic goals and outcomes.
- 2.9. In addition, the Engagement Champions programme has increased officers ability to undertake expert engagement and participation practice across many workstreams, however it is important that we take the opportunity to continue to learn more about our faith communities, continuing to grow our partnerships and build strong relationships and establish trust and reach with faith leaders.
- 2.10. Progress has also been made with safeguarding, where we are working with officers to promote initiatives and improve connections with faith organisations locally. The Safeguarding Adults Board (SAB) has started to connect more formally with faith organisations, to raise awareness of SAB with faith leadership across the borough. Safeguarding is a top priority for many faith organisations (as evidenced by the survey work to produce the Faith Build Community Policy), and we have worked hard to make effective progress in this area. We have worked with the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO) to introduce a template safeguarding policy, that can be utilised by any organisation, alongside recent training and development opportunities which have been communicated to faith leaders. Improving safeguarding practice is a constant process, and there will be many more opportunities to connect faith leadership in with initiatives over the course of delivering the phased action plan.
- 2.11. The Council also continues to maintain links to the Barking & Dagenham Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (BDSACRE), which is responsible for advising the local authority on religious education (RE). A function of the RE advisor is to offer advice on school issues to the Local Authority, for example where there is an opportunity to unpick cultural as opposed to religious objections to parts of the school curriculum. The SACRE also provides a useful professional sounding board to officers, who have been asked for views and opinions on a range of topics, including;
 - Local tensions or possible flashpoints e.g. the launch of the new Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) guidelines in schools.
 - Public Health messaging e.g. Flu vaccine information and guidance for Muslim parents.
 - Or during other world events (wars, terrorist attacks, police incidents) that could have an effect on the diverse communities in Barking & Dagenham.
- 2.12. Finally continued, coordinated effort is needed to ensure that statutory partners and services are on hand to offer advice and guidance, support and opportunities to faith organisations to keep them involved and current, and that we use all available means of doing this. This has been provided in many forms from the Council, not just with the

establishment of the new network. Faith organisations are continuing to benefit from stronger relationships with many departments in the council, including Public Health, Community Safety, Safeguarding, Events, Community Solutions and Participation & Engagement to name a few.

3. What next

- 3.1. The aim is to deliver the majority of the actions in the phased action plan over the course of the next 18 months, however we know that the landscape in the borough has shifted since the launch of the Faith Builds Community policy. New faith organisations are emerging periodically, and we need to employ a flexible approach that enables the development of new actions, to complement the existing approach. Therefore, we are proposing that phases four and five offer space and capacity, that can be filled with future actions that meet the needs of faith organisations at the time.
- 3.2. In addition, if agreed, officers will convene a meeting of members of the Overview and Scrutiny committee with faith leaders to discuss the action plan.
- 3.3. There is much to be proud of in the work that has been undertaken over the course of the last few years. By developing a local policy that explores themes and commits stakeholders in more depth, Barking & Dagenham has gone even further in strengthening its approach to supporting its faith communities than any other borough in the UK.
- 3.4. Faith organisations have played a key role in helping to ensure residents are better protected against the most challenging life events. The cost-of-living crisis has laid bare the type of support that is necessary and vital to ensure residents are not left behind, and with valuable, coordinated, whole-council support and investment, faith organisations and the strong leadership within them will continue to play their part in ensuring that this continues in the future.

4. Financial Implications

- 4.1. Any budgets mentioned have been used from existing ringfenced funding.

5. Legal Implications

- 5.1. Refer to Appendix 2 – OSC Faith Engagement Feb 2023

6. Consultation

Consulted	Meeting	Date
Cabinet Member for Community Leadership & Engagement	Faith Engagement Update	11 Sep 2023
	Portfolio Meeting	03 Oct 2023
Executive Team	Executive Team Meeting	14 Sep 2023

Public Background Papers Used in the Preparation of the Report: None

List of appendices:

- Appendix 1. Action Plan for Faith Engagement
- Appendix 2. OSC Faith Engagement Feb 2023