Faith and belief in partnership
Effective collaboration with local government
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Abbreviations

BSCB Barnet Safeguarding Children’s Board

DCLG Department for Communities and Local Government

FBO/s faith based organisation/s

LGA Local Government Association

LSP local strategic partnership

PVE preventing violent extremism

VCS voluntary and community sector organisations

VCFS voluntary, community and faith sector organisations

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Executive summary

Introduction

Religious and belief issues have become increasingly significant for councils and their partners in recent years, in part due to the inclusion of ‘religion and belief’ in the Equality Act as well as government agendas on partnership, community empowerment and preventing violent extremism. The coalition Government’s policies on localism, the Big Society, integration and deficit-reduction suggest a continued, if not increased, need for councils to work in dialogue and partnership with the voluntary, community and faith sectors. This section summarises key strategies and methods of effective partnership and engagement adopted by councils and faith and humanist partners in four case study areas across England: Watford, Barnet, Leicester and Pendle. It is primarily aimed at councils and faith and belief groups with an interest in working together, but will also be of relevance to voluntary and community sector organisations and other statutory partners. The research entailed 39 semi-structured interviews, two focus groups and a documentary review undertaken between September 2010 and July 2011. It was funded by Local Government Improvement and Development (LG Improvement and Development) and focused on the opportunities, challenges and methods of effective partnership and engagement.

Engaging faith and belief groups: opportunities and challenges

Councils have worked with faith and belief groups in a variety of ways, including: consultation; funding and commissioning; participation on governing bodies, committees and strategic partnerships; and organising and attending community festivals and events. Drawing upon Lowndes and Chapman’s typology (2007) a rationale for engagement, and associated benefits, can be summarised as follows:

- **Normative** – this stresses the role of faith and humanist groups in relation to community values and identities, linked to their theology or belief system and their enduring presence within communities. Values and principles such as peace, humanity, reconciliation, transformation, forgiveness, charity, trust, service to others and social justice, can underpin and motivate social action and the engagement of faith and/or humanist groups on governing bodies. Where shared, these values can form a basis for cohesion and shared identity. Faith groups are also seen to offer a holistic perspective, concerning all aspects of community life (eg health, well-being, economic, cultural) that can transcend boundaries (such as age and social class) and time.

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1. See sections three and seven of the main report for more details.
2. See case studies six and seven in the main report for examples.
their long-term presence in communities, which can counteract the short-termism of policy initiatives). They can work with councils to celebrate diversity and help keep statutory partners up to speed with what is going on in a local area.

- **Resources** – this emphasises the organisational capacity of faith and humanist groups in developing members’ skills, mobilising volunteers, providing staff and venues, and in reaching marginalised or excluded groups. By working together, councils and faith and humanist groups can: benefit from shared resources (including information, expertise, voluntary effort, buildings and finance), promote good practice (for example, in relation to safeguarding children3 or resilience planning) and gain wider access to faith, cultural and ‘difficult to reach’ communities.

- **Governance** – this stresses the representative and leadership role of faith or belief groups inside communities and within broader policy networks and partnerships. Representatives from such groups can, for example, provide information and expertise on cultural, religious or other issues (such as those surrounding the VCS, migration, death4, health care, child protection, community conflict, and faith hate crimes). They can also endeavour to speak on behalf of geographical, ethnic, cultural or faith based communities.

The above rationales offer a basis from which faith and humanist groups can help councils achieve their policy and/or broader societal goals, such as community empowerment, integration, encouraging active citizenship, effective and responsive service provision, poverty reduction and regeneration. It can also help councils to improve their understanding and accommodation of diverse needs and interests, meet equality and diversity requirements, and enhance their reputation and community relations. Such benefits have led councils in the case study areas to actively engage faith groups (alongside the wider VCS and business sectors) in preparing for and responding to the Localism Bill (2011) and the Big Society agenda (see section seven in the main report). Local councillors can also become better informed about community issues and enhance their profile through engaging with faith and humanist groups, alongside other community groups, although there is scope for improvement in the extent to which this takes place5.

However, faith and humanist engagement can also be challenging. Anxieties may emerge over proselytisation, equalities issues (particularly around sexuality and gender), the perceived privileging of faith or humanist groups regarding policy influence and funding, and the extent to which diversity of faith and no faith can be represented6.

Effective partnership and engagement takes time. In the planning phases, it involves making a number of decisions about the purpose of engagement; methods and timescales for participation; who the stakeholders are; who the participants and/or representatives will be and the basis by which they will be contacted and/or selected; and how best to approach groups and build

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3 See case study two in the main report for an example.
4 See case study five in the main report for an example.
5 Barriers include: a feeling that dialogue with faith communities is not a legitimate part of their role; lack of knowledge and confidence to engage; anxieties around saying or doing the ‘wrong thing’ and offending people; faith or cultural barriers; and/or mistrust by certain groups towards the State.
6 See table two in the full report (section nine) for an overview of the potential opportunities, challenges and contribution of faith and belief engagement to national and local policy objectives.
good relations. Such decisions need to be taken with a view to the potential benefits, challenges and capacity, support and resources available. Specific challenges may be faced where there are funding and resource cuts. The next section summarises the strategies and methods used to facilitate effective engagement and partnership within the four case studies.

Methods of effective engagement

As noted above, councils have engaged and worked with faith and humanist groups in a variety of ways. Many of them have consulted and/or worked with local inter-faith forums, which involve different religious and, in some cases, humanist groups. Councils have also consulted and worked with single faith or humanist groups and/or VCS organisations with a link to religion. Effective methods for consulting these groups are similar to those of other VCS groups, and include: using a variety of consultation methods; adopting a collaborative approach to engagement (including where faith and VCS organisations take a lead role in setting up events and/or consulting more widely within their communities); building trust and relationships (see below); and providing feedback on consultation activities to participants. In relation to funding and commissioning, councils have sought to ensure effective engagement and address concerns over proselytisation, equalities issues and the perceived privileging of faith groups through:

- Having a good understanding of faith sector organisations and faith based provision, including their motivations, contribution, and similarities and distinctiveness to secular VCS organisations (see Chapman, 2009). This can help councils meet needs, avoid duplication and better respond to budget constraints and the localism and Big Society agendas.
- Basing projects on community development principles.
- Testing out new ideas and approaches on a small scale before implementing them more widely.
- Strong leadership by a mayor, cabinet member or senior executive to facilitate a culture and context that values and engages with faith and belief groups.
- Myth busting.
- Clear and transparent funding guidelines, including around not funding religious activity.
- Conceptualising faith based community organisations as part of the wider VCS.
- Helping faith and humanist organisations to become more articulate about their values, ethos and activities.

The use of accreditation, quality assurance and kite-mark initiatives, such as VISIBLE, can help faith based organisations communicate their work and organisational viability to potential funders and partners.

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7 See appendix one and case study nine for examples of faith based networks and organisations that have worked with statutory partners.
8 See case study one in the main report for an example.

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9 This initiative has been piloted by the Faith based Regeneration Network in partnership with Community Matters, the Church Urban Fund and Goldsmiths College (University of London). See Dinham et al (2011) for a research report on assessing quality in faith based social action. The VISIBLE website can be accessed at: www.visiblecommunities.org.uk
Identifying the stakeholders, participants and representatives

Mapping exercises can be useful for identifying key stakeholders and faith based provision. This may take the form of directories of places of worship and/or faith based organisations and provision. The process of compiling directories can offer a mechanism for information exchange and, when analysed alongside ward profiles and services, can help identify gaps in statutory or faith based provision. Data on religion or belief may be collected by councils as part of standard equalities questions, although it may have limitations. Proxy indicators (e.g., origin or ethnicity) have sometimes been used to estimate faith affiliation, and some councils have benefited from acquiring data from VCS and faith sector umbrella organisations.

Stakeholders can be direct participants, where they speak for themselves or their own organisation. They can also act as representatives, where they speak on behalf of the needs or interests of others, or speak from a more general VCS, faith or cultural perspective. Identifying who within the various faith and belief communities to engage, and how, can be challenging. The following criteria are seen by some local authority officers as important characteristics of a legitimate representative:

- a charismatic and powerful figure in the faith and/or VCS
- well connected to various grass root and community organisations and inter-faith networks and forums
- a good reputation
- Relevant expertise and knowledge
- good personal networking and communication skills
- does not claim to speak on behalf of all faiths (or non) or even all traditions within their own faith or belief system, yet has enough understanding to be aware of many of the issues
- is able to maintain a level of independence from statutory partners, ie not be seen as a government or council ‘pet’.

Having more than one faith representative on governing bodies and ensuring they are well connected to, and informed by, various single and inter-faith organisations can help faith groups speak with a stronger, more coordinated and legitimate voice. It can also provide avenues for the nomination of suitable representatives and accountability back to faith communities. However, it is important to stress that there are limitations to the extent to which one or two people can represent diversity, and methods of interest formulation and accountability are likely to be ad hoc and informal. It is important, therefore, that statutory partners are aware of such limitations and seek to consult more widely where this is appropriate.

The formal engagement of secular groups in local authority consultations and partnerships is patchy. Some interviewees felt humanist groups can make a valuable contribution, eg through representing the concept of non-religious beliefs, acting as a reminder that there are people that do not believe in religious doctrine, and through bringing a focus on values, such as working for the good of society, peace and justice. Others suggest that humanist or secular groups

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10 See the case study ten for an example of this.
are not particularly active in their area and/or that their approach may need to change (ie become less aggressive towards religion) for them to be seen as legitimate partners. Issues of representing diversity emerge, especially as not all non-religious people would identify themselves as humanists. Some humanists have responded to this by seeking to represent the concept of non-religious beliefs, rather than people.

Initiating contact and building trust

Building relationships and trust takes time and effort. Some councils stress the value of building relationships with faith and humanist groups in the ‘good times’, as this can develop necessary trust and networks to help navigate through more challenging times. Effective strategies for initiating contact include:

• ‘Getting out there’ and meeting people on ‘their own turf’.
• Going through ‘gatekeepers’ and/or seeking to contact and work with influential people, although it is sometimes seen to be important to go beyond ‘gatekeepers’ and/or ‘the usual suspects’ (ie people who tend to be well known and actively involved in the public sphere).
• Using ‘brokers’ to help initiate contact and build trust and understanding between statutory partners and faith or humanist groups. These could be local authority officers and/or councillors that are religious or humanist or who have a good understanding of faith or belief. They could also be religious or community leaders with a good understanding of statutory partners.

The following strategies are found to be useful for developing deeper relations and trust:

• starting relationship building with more outward looking faith or belief groups first
• undertaking joint work and activities, which enables partners to get to know and understand one another better
• identifying and communicating potential win-win opportunities of engagement to the local authority and faith or humanist groups11, and demonstrating and celebrating success
• ensuring open, honest, respectful, assertive and transparent communication, and acknowledging the views of others when working together.

For some, too much focus on faith can be counter productive to facilitating good relations and integration on the basis that it can heighten a sense of ‘the other’, alienate those of no faith and send out a message that certain policy goals (such as cohesion) are about race and/or faith.

Resources, capacity and support

Research by Fentener et al (2008) suggests that limited resources and capacity among the faith sector is one of the biggest barriers to faith engagement. Limited time and/or resources may be particularly problematic for smaller or less well established faith groups, or for those that have falling membership/11 Key benefits to faith and belief groups of their engagement can include: helping statutory partners better understand their needs and issues; giving the VCS and faith sector a stronger voice and policy influence; keeping up to speed with what’s going on in a local area; securing support and resources for social action from statutory partners; and ensuring that the practical contribution of faith or belief groups is recognised.
donations or that rely heavily on voluntary
effort rather than paid staff or clergy. Greater
collaboration within the faith sector, and
between it and the VCS and public sector,
is a frequently cited strategy for dealing with
funding cuts and austerity measures and
responding to the Big Society and localism
agendas. Yet, effective partnership between
councils and the VCS and faith sectors is
considered by some interviewees to be
patchy and in need of improvement. Steps
taken to address support and resource
needs include:

• undertaking mapping exercises to gain a
clear sense of who is doing what and of
potential partnership opportunities and
gaps
• skills development, training and support
around partnership working, especially for
those that are unfamiliar or struggle with it
• training on networking, negotiation and
communication skills
• literacy training for local authority staff
and councillors on religion, the VCS and
humanism, and training for faith and
humanist groups on the functioning of the
State
• having dedicated officers and councillors
with a faith or belief responsibility
• creating or getting involved in mentoring
schemes
• supporting local inter-faith organisations
through funding or other support eg the
use of venues and administrative support
• ensuring more streamlined and simplified
bureaucracy
• ensuring early and open communication
and dialogue around funding cuts and
timing cuts to help minimise harm to faith
and VCS organisations
• holding events focusing on responding
to the current policy climate and austerity
measures12
• signposting VCS and faith based
organisations to other sources of funding
or resources and actively supporting them
to strengthen funding applications.

Collaboration between faith based
organisations and the wider VCS can
take many forms, including: dialogue and
joint social action; work on partnerships
and equalities boards; and the sharing
and exchange of information, support
and resources13. It is widely recognised
that better links between faith based
organisations and the wider VCS could be
made (Boeck et al, 2009; NCVO, 2007). This
is especially so among smaller faith based
organisations who could, for example, be
encouraged to work together to bid for larger
contracts and/or could share organisational
resources such as human resource and
payroll systems. There is potential for
councils and umbrella VCS organisations to
facilitate and support greater collaboration,
for example, by holding events where
faith and secular VCS organisations meet
and start to build understanding and trust.
Communicating a clear rationale for greater
collaboration and focusing on the practical
community based elements of faith based
organisations can be helpful in overcoming
barriers to working together such as: faith
based organisations not seeing themselves
as part of the wider VCS or not knowing
of the existence or relevance of Councils
for Voluntary Services, lack of awareness
or understanding by the secular VCS of

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12 See for example case study one in the main report.
13 See case study ten in the main report for an example.
how to engage faith based organisations; and anxieties and misconceptions around proselytisation.

Concluding remarks

Partnership and engagement can help councils and faith and humanist groups better achieve their policy, service delivery and social action goals, as well as enhance participatory and representative democracy. It can also pose a number of challenges, such as deciding when and how best to engage such groups, and how to address any barriers to engagement and/or concerns over proselytisation and equalities issues. The extent to which the benefits can be harnessed, and challenges overcome, will depend on the willingness and efforts of policy-makers, practitioners and faith and humanist groups alike. This summary has outlined various strategies and methods used in four case study areas to help build effective partnership and engagement. More details of these, and the benefits and challenges underpinning them, can be found in the main report, which also contains practical and policy recommendations (see section ten) for national government, the Local Government Association (LGA), councils, faith and humanist groups; and VCS infrastructure organisations.
Religion and belief issues have become increasingly significant for councils and their partners in recent years. Reasons for this include (see LGA, 2008):

- inclusion in the Equality Act of ‘religion and belief’ as a protected characteristic in status and priority alongside ‘race’ in the ‘good relations’ duty
- a greater recognition of the positive and potential contribution that faith communities can make within their local areas, including through social action\(^\text{14}\), public service delivery and strategy development
- the need to facilitate effective integration and cohesion, and the role of faith communities in relation to this
- growing religious diversity and an awareness of the importance of religious identity and needs to many people in Britain, including new migrants
- the ‘duty to involve’, which is a statutory requirement for councils and other bodies to consult with individuals and groups in their local area on matters that are likely to affect them\(^\text{15}\)
- questions raised by policy-makers and practitioners over potential benefits, problems and/or challenges associated with a role for humanist and secular groups in the policy process, particularly in light of increased representation and inclusion of faith groups.

Since the 1990s, new opportunities and expectations for partnership working between local government and faith groups have emerged. These include representation on local partnership bodies (such as local strategic partnerships), consultations and the provision by faith-based organisations of state funded welfare services and programmes. Their engagement is valued in terms of enhanced policy responsiveness and service performance as well as promoting democratic participation by widening representation and accountability, particularly of communities that would otherwise be under represented. In addition to consulting and working in partnership with faith groups, councils also play an active role in supporting local inter-faith dialogue and social action.

\(^{14}\) Social action here means organised activity intended to benefit others and society eg through improving human welfare or deepening civic culture.

\(^{15}\) The duty to involve was introduced in the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act and took effect from April 2009. It imposes a duty on all councils and best value authorities to “involve local representatives when carrying out any of its functions by providing information, consulting or involving in another way” (LG Improvement and Development, 2011). There have been indications that the Coalition Government was planning to repeal the duty, although to date only a separate set of duties relating to the promotion of democracy and provisions about petitions to councils under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 have been repealed in the Localism Act (2011). These duties require councils to promote understanding of how they function and of the opportunities for the public to influence decision-making, as well as provide a facility for people to make petitions electronically and implement a system for handling paper and electronic petitions (Great Britain Parliament, 2009).
Under the previous New Labour Government, much work and capacity building was undertaken to develop local, regional and national inter-faith infrastructure to support collaboration, cohesion and the contribution of faith groups to policy development and delivery. The current Coalition Government’s emphasis on the Big Society, localism, building stronger and more integrated communities and tackling extremism, together with its manifesto pledge to promote and support faith, voluntary and charitable groups, suggests that effective partnership between local government and faith and belief groups remains important.

To date, much of the research and academic literature around faith engagement has focused on the policy rationales and challenges of involving faith groups in regeneration, civil renewal and neighbourhood governance (for example, Chapman and Lowndes 2009 and 2008, Lowndes and Chapman 2007 and 2005; Grieve et al 2007; NCVO 2007; Farnell et al 2006; Furbey et al 2006; Baker and Skinner 2005; Farnell et al 2003). Little research has been undertaken as to how this applies specifically to the engagement of faith and belief groups across councils. What has been done is primarily survey based (eg Berkeley et al, 2006 and LGA, 2008). As a result, a number of areas require further and deeper investigation, such as:

- **awareness, experience and knowledge**: a need to better understand the potential, pitfalls and suitability of engagement methods across different contexts
- **democratic legitimacy**: knowing who best to work with, how to develop effective relationships and how to approach representativeness and accountability issues
- **problem solving**: how best to support and work together to address issues of sustainability, poverty, integration and cohesion
- **commissioning**: the benefits, challenges, ways of commissioning faith or belief groups, and how best to address concerns around the use of funds, proselytising and equalities
- **capacity and resources**: dealing with lack of capacity and resources, for example resulting from funding cuts.

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16 Although see Fenterer et al (2008) for a qualitative study examining the relationship between faith based organisations and government at the local and regional level.
In the context of a limited evidence base, this report presents findings of in-depth qualitative research that sought to uncover the methods by which these challenges are being addressed and to identify transferable knowledge, good practice and learning. This is ever more important under the Coalition Government, with public sector cuts, and its emphasis on the ‘Big Society’, localism and building stronger and more integrated communities. In some localities this is prompting councils to review how they engage with faith and civil society groups, through for example: shaping the meaning of the ‘Big Society’; consulting on spending priorities, commissioning frameworks, policy development and service delivery; promoting volunteering and social responsibility; and supporting social action. However, there are significant challenges and pressures facing all parties concerned resulting from, for example, resource and funding cuts and the speed of change and uncertainties surrounding this. Addressing and/or adapting to these challenges suggests an even greater need for councils, faith and belief groups to enhance their understanding of each other, as well as to sustain and build on the work and infrastructure that has already been developed and find new and more effective ways of working together. As will be seen, increased collaboration and partnership working is seen as key to identifying potential opportunities and meeting many of the challenges associated with the current economic, social and political climate.

The structure of the report is as follows. Section three provides a more detailed overview of the policy context. Section four outlines the research objectives and methodology. The following three sections present the research findings. Of these, section five looks specifically at local authority consultations and membership of faith and belief groups on partnerships, committees and governing bodies. Section six investigates local authority funding and commissioning of faith based social action and initiatives. Section seven presents findings relating to the Big Society agenda. This is followed, in section eight, by an overview of key factors and cross-cutting themes relating to successful collaboration. The conclusion is presented in section nine. Before turning to section three, it is important to set out a number of definitions.

Definitions

For the purposes of this report, the following definitions apply:

- Faith community – refers to individual citizens and their families who have a religious identification or affiliation and who may or may not take part in regular worship (Chapman and Lowndes, 2008).
- Faith or belief group – refers to members of a religious or secular organisation or group, including a worshiping community, faith-based organisation (see below) or humanist organisation.
- Faith-based organisations (FBOs) - include places of worship (eg a church, temple or mosque) as well as voluntary and community organisations (VCS) that are to some extent grounded in a faith tradition but which may serve the community more widely.
- Humanism – an approach to life that is based on human reason, intrinsic moral values, common humanity, human nature and experience (Suffolk Inter-Faith
Humanists uphold the search for human fulfilment and believe that human thought and action, assisted through the application of science and technology, is key to solving the world’s problems (World Humanist Congress, 2002). They reject religious doctrine, supernaturalism and superstition as a basis for morality and decision-making. Key characteristics of a humanist are: “no belief in any God, in an afterlife, or in anything supernatural; the belief that we should try to live full and happy lives, and help others to do the same; the belief that all situations and people deserve to be judged on their own merits, by standards of reason and humanity; the belief that individualism and social cooperation are equally important” (Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, 2005, 28)\(^\text{17}\). It is important to note that some humanists regard themselves as atheists, whereas others identify themselves as agnostic, and that many non-religious people do not consider themselves humanist (Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, 2005).

- **Belief groups** - refers to members of a secular humanist organisation or group.

- **Faith and/or humanist representative** – a person with a faith or humanist identity who speaks or acts on behalf of others on public partnerships or in dialogue/consultations with people from other sectors, such as the public, voluntary and community or private sectors. This definition includes those who are self defined representatives or who are defined as such by other partners.

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\(^{17}\) See the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 on the International Humanist and Ethical Union website for a fuller definition of humanism that has a degree of international agreement ([http://www.iheu.org/adamdecl.htm](http://www.iheu.org/adamdecl.htm)).
The nature and degree of ‘secularism’ and multiculturalism creates a unique context in Britain. The UK as a whole is recognised as having a greater degree of diversity of world religions than any other country of the European Union; with this diversity being a strongly visible part of public life (Weller et al 2007, 21). Christianity remains the predominant religion, with Muslims forming the next largest religious group. There are also relatively large groupings of Hindus, Sikhs and Jews, together with smaller numbers of Buddhists, Bahá’ís, Jains and Zoroastrians (Weller et al 2007, 21). According to the 2001 population census (Office of National Statistics 2004), 72 per cent of people identify with a Christian tradition and a further five per cent to a non-Christian denomination (over half of which are Muslims). People identifying with no religion make up 15 per cent of the population. These findings have led some people of faith to argue for an increased role of religion in public life, although such arguments, and the degree to which the census statistics reflects active and strong religiosity, as opposed to a weaker cultural affiliation, have been challenged by some secular organisations (see Spratt and James, 2008, p7; British Humanist Association, 2011a). The British Social Attitudes survey, which asked respondents ‘do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?’, indicated that 50 per cent of all people in Britain in 2008 stated that they belonged to the Christian religion, with 3 per cent Muslim, 1 per cent Jewish, 3 per cent other religions and 43 per cent no religion (see Perfect, 2011, p8).

As with other countries, the role and relationship between the State and faith groups in England is complex and has changed over time. Following the Reformation in the 16th century, the Church of England played a central role in exercising social control and in providing education, health and social care. The role of the state was seen to be minimal and regulatory (Taylor, 2004). By the 20th century, the balance shifted towards a more secular welfare state whereby religious organisations became more subordinate and the state played an increasing role as a regulator, funder and then provider. This trend cumulated in the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state in the 1940s, in which the State took major responsibility for welfare. Whilst Christianity no longer had such a central role in shaping political and social policy (Momen, 1999, 480) it continued to have an input in politics through the Church of England Bishops’ role as lawmakers in the House of Lords and through dialogue between Ministers and faith organisations, leaders and citizens on the development of policies and legislation. Humanists are also involved in Parliament and can become members of the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, which brings together non-religious MPs and Peers to discuss matters of shared interests, such as...
constitutional reform, education and public services (see British Humanist Association, 2010).

From the 1990s onwards, new opportunities have emerged for faith and, to a lesser extent, humanist engagement in policy development and service delivery. This includes representation on partnership bodies, consultations and the provision by faith-based organisations of state funded welfare services and programmes. Such opportunities emerged in the context of the previous UK Government’s agendas on partnership, democratic renewal and community empowerment. This, together with concerns over polarisation and religious extremism, led the New Labour Government to declare an intention to work more closely with faith groups and citizens to facilitate community cohesion, active citizenship and good governance, as well as help prevent violent extremism. At the local level, direct engagement and representation of faith groups on partnerships has taken place most notably on LSPs. Councils have also been encouraged to engage faith groups in developing local compacts, and to consult with them on various policy issues, including education, cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism. At the local level, direct engagement and representation of faith groups on partnerships has taken place most notably on LSPs. Councils have also been encouraged to engage faith groups in developing local compacts, and to consult with them on various policy issues, including education, cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism. Faith groups were seen to “play an essential role, alongside others, in building cohesion by promoting and supporting a society based on mutual respect and an understanding between people of all faiths and none” (DCLG, 2007, p12). In short, religion in the UK moved up the political agenda and official discourse and policy initiatives structured around the notion of ‘faith communities’ emerged, see for example ‘Face to Face and Side by Side: A framework for partnership in our multi faith society’ (DCLG, 2008a).

Various funding programmes, including the ‘Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund’ (worth over £12 million between 2006 and 2008) and ‘Faiths in Action’ (worth £4 million between 2010 and 2011) were established. These aimed to support faith, inter-faith and non-faith based groups to build capacity around community cohesion, develop inter-faith programmes, promote faith participation in civil society and develop strong and sustainable partnerships. Separate funding was also administered to Muslim community organisations to develop skills and training projects targeted at marginalised Muslim women and young men as part of the preventing violent extremism (PVE) strategy. Local forums against extremism and Islamophobia were established to build relationships between key local partners, including representatives from Muslim communities, councils and the police. These were intended to provide a safe space for discussion, feed into local policy-making and take forward projects for tackling and building resistance to extremism (DCLG, 2008b, p7).

The formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in May 2010 has brought change. Councils are facing substantial cuts, totalling £1.166 billion in 2010/11. National policy discourse has shifted away from New Labour notions of community cohesion, the Prevent programme has been reviewed in light of criticism that it conflated action on terrorism with cohesion, and new policies are emerging on localism, the ‘Big Society’ and integration. These emphasise the decentralisation of power and responsibility, philanthropic action and better understanding and relationships between groups. They embody a range of public sector reforms, including more freedoms and flexibility for
councils; new rights and powers for local communities through a ‘right to challenge’, ‘right to buy’ and greater scope for the calling of local referendums; and reforms to make the planning system more democratic and effective. The Big Society and localism agendas also suggest a need for councils to continue and/or increase dialogue and partnership working with VCS organisations and businesses.

A potential role for faith groups in these policy agendas has been identified in ministerial speeches by Eric Pickles (2011), Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and Baroness Warsi (2011), Minister without portfolio and co-chair of the Conservative Party. Both have emphasised the continued importance of faith communities in undertaking social action and philanthropic giving, and in relation to building social capital, responsibility and better relationships between groups. They urge faith groups to make use of new opportunities and powers emerging from the localism bill, such as the ‘right to buy’ and ‘right to challenge’, and recognise the need to address barriers to their engagement. A three year initiative of the Church Urban Fund, Near Neighbours, was also opened in 2011 with £5 million support from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). This aims to help support faith and non-faith based organisations to undertake social interaction and action in targeted diverse and multi-faith localities in the North West Mills towns, Leicester, London and Birmingham. The initiative is being administered with the help of the Church of England’s parish infrastructure. More recently, the Government’s strategy for integration, ‘Creating the Conditions for Integration’ (DCLG, 2012), has emphasised the role of faith groups in developing common shared aspirations and values, celebrating volunteering effort and undertaking social action. The Government aims to encourage inter faith and collaborative activity and is supporting the national Faith based Regeneration Network and Inter Faith Network for the UK to link and strengthen faith-based social action projects and inter faith groups at the local, regional and national level (DCLG, 2012, p15).

The revised PVE strategy (Home Office, 2011) also contains a commitment to continue governmental dialogue with faith representatives on security and other issues, and to undertake capacity building to better enable faith organisations to reach people who are vulnerable to radicalisation. There are plans to fund dedicated Prevent coordinators within councils and greater partnership working is being encouraged between local partners to deliver the PVE strategy. As for partnerships more generally, initial indications are that many areas intend to retain a more streamlined set of local partnership working arrangements following the post election policy reforms (LG Improvement and Development, 2011). The impact of this on faith engagement remains to be seen. However, faith representation continues on some LSPs, albeit to in the context of uncertainty over the future role and continuation of some of these partnerships. Many LSPs are, for example, reviewing their role and functions in light of the abolition of local area agreements, which formed a substantial part of their workload.
In summary, the current policy and socio-economic context presents both opportunities and challenges for councils working in partnership with faith and belief groups. It is prompting many councils to review and consider further scope for engaging VCS and faith groups. Greater inclusion of the faith sector in the policy realm has also led some policy-makers and practitioners, as well as more secular organisations, to question whether non-religious needs, interests and contributions are sufficiently accommodated.
4. Research aims, objectives and methodology

The research on which this report is based explored the opportunities, challenges and strategies associated with effective partnership working between councils and faith and belief groups. The research objectives were as follows:

• to examine the nature and methods of local authority engagement with faith and humanist groups and identify what works/does not work so well
• to identify the opportunities and benefits to councils, faith groups and humanists of their engagement
• to highlight specific issues and challenges faced by councils, faith groups and humanists in working together
• to identify transferable knowledge, good practice and learning.

Case study research was undertaken in the following four local authority areas across England: Watford (East of England); Barnet (London); Leicester City (East Midlands) and Pendle (North West). The case studies aim to reflect variability in: geographic regions; religious diversity, as indicated by the proportion of non-Christian faiths; type and structure of local government; political control and composition; population and the degree of urbanisation. Among the case studies, Barnet and Leicester are particularly religiously diverse with Watford and Pendle less so; although they have relatively high proportions of non-Christian faiths when compared to many other localities in their respective regions. Two of the case study authorities have a two-tier local government structure, ie Pendle and Watford. The political control and composition of each local authority area can be seen in table one.

Table 1: Political composition and control 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Watford</th>
<th>Barnet</th>
<th>Leicester City</th>
<th>Pendle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>No One Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 BNP, 1 Independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Approximately 14 per cent of Pendle’s population is rural according to the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) classification system\textsuperscript{18}, whereas the other three localities are predominately urban. Watford and Pendle have lower mid-year population estimates of between 86,000 and 89,300 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), cited on NOMIS, 2011). This compares to Leicester City at 306,600, and Barnet at 348,200 (ONS, cited on NOMIS, 2011). Leicester also has a history and good reputation for engaging faith groups, which was deemed to be useful for identifying potential good practice.

Data collection was based on qualitative research methods, including a documentary review, 39 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups held between 2010 and 2011. Documents reviewed included research reports, policy documents, guidance materials, internal protocols and terms of reference. Snowballing techniques, involving asking research participants and other contacts to suggest potential individuals and organisations to take part in the research, was used to help identify research participants. A two day case study visit was arranged for each local authority area in which face-to-face interviews were undertaken.

Telephone interviews were also undertaken with national level actors in order to gain a broader overview. Research participants included: local authority officers; elected members; faith groups eg faith representatives, faith leaders, local inter-faith bodies and members of faith based organisations (FBOs); humanists; policy-makers; and consultants involved in supporting faith based social action. Perspectives were sought from interviewees of faith and no-faith. Those that identified themselves as religious included: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jewish, Sikhs, Bahá’ís and Buddhists. The interviews were transcribed and data thematically coded and analysed using a computer software package (Nvivo). The next four sections present the findings of the research.

\textsuperscript{18} \url{http://tinyurl.com/dxj9xx8}
Councils have worked with faith and belief groups in a variety of ways, including: consultation; funding and commissioning; participation on governing bodies, committees and strategic partnerships; organising and attending community festivals and events; and on faith hate reporting. This section explores the nature, methods and impacts of faith and humanist engagement as it applies to consultations and partnerships.

Consultations

Consultations with faith and belief groups can be: formal or informal; face-to-face, postal or online; involve a range of faith actors (including single faith or humanist organisations, networks, inter-faith forums and faith and humanist representatives – see appendix one also); and can focus on issues specific to faith communities and/or be done as part of wider consultation events with other stakeholders. According to a survey undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA, 2008, p8) 78 per cent of councils which had a local inter-faith organisation consulted it on local policy matters, and 26 per cent consulted humanist groups. Consultations covered a vast range of topics, including: cohesion, equalities and diversity, empowerment, sustainable community strategies, PVE, active citizenship, crime and disorder, planning, education, health and social care, culture, environment, regeneration, safeguarding children, and sport and leisure. Recent case study examples of consultations involving faith and humanist groups included budget and spending reviews and conferences on the Big Society (see box one below).

Box 1: Case Study on Pendle community conversations

A series of community conversations has been held in Pendle, providing a focused space for deliberation, relationship building and information sharing between groups and organisations from the public, voluntary and community, faith and business sectors. These conversations cover a range of topical issues and are held every other month, varying in duration from two hours in an evening to a whole day. So far, topics have included issues such as Israel and Gaza, the comprehensive spending review and the Big Society. Conversation topics may be suggested by community groups. They may take the form of seminars, consultation meetings and/or conferences. Different organisations, including those from the VCS, take lead responsibility for organising and facilitating the conversations. This collaborative approach is seen to work better than the local authority always taking a lead, as other faith based organisations have

19 In one local authority area, a number of faith based organisations have been trained to act as third party faith hate reporting points for people who don’t feel confident to report hate crime directly to the police. The information is recorded and then passed on to the relevant authorities.
Access to specific networks through which they can encourage greater participation, and are sometimes better placed to get messages across. Faith leaders and organisations may, for example, be trusted more than statutory partners by some citizens.

Key outcomes include: relationship building, better understanding, preparing and responding to change (such as the Big Society and localism agendas), identifying innovative approaches, information sharing and the development of new and collaborative activities. Joint reports have also been written, which have sought to influence wider government policy and practice. One such report was co-produced by Building Bridges Pendle (an inter-faith organisation) and the council based on four consultation meetings. These aimed to promote dialogue and understanding on British Foreign Policy and its impact on cohesion and the PVE agenda. The report helped raise Pendle’s profile by making several recommendations aimed at, and presented to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as well as other national government departments, councils and partners. Three conferences have also been run on the Big Society on which reports are available online. The events engaged with over 300 people, helped celebrate achievements made through previous funding rounds, and facilitated debate and understanding on the changing policy agenda, future funding, social enterprise and the future role of the LSP. Starting the ‘ball rolling’ early, despite the perceived ambiguousness of the Big Society concept, was regarded as good practice in getting people thinking and preparing for change. It “got people going off and talking about social enterprises and localism” (local authority officer).

Consultations with faith, humanist and VCS groups can help provide councils with information and knowledge, as the following quotes illustrate:

“It can challenge and more importantly, or equally as importantly, it can actually improve and it can provide a really sound and strong, I think, knowledge base that we can draw on, you know, to improve the way that we deliver services to meet the needs of people within our communities; residents, visitors, workers.” (Council officer)

“Our primary source of intelligence on the recent European migration issues was through the [Catholic] Church.” (Council officer)

Reasons for not consulting local inter-faith organisations can include perceptions that they do not adequately represent faiths in an area (LGA, 2008). In some areas, inter-faith organisations may not exist or be very active. One inter-faith forum, for example, formally meets twice a year.

Local authority officers commented on the importance of: using a variety of consultation tools and techniques to ‘cover all bases’; using IT, social media and e-consultation techniques to tap into community based voices (especially younger people); and building and maintaining personal contacts, trust and understanding among faith and belief groups to achieve genuine consultation and feedback (see also section eight).

As one officer commented:

“I think your face-to-face and your on-line service will give you a quick snapshot and some good statistics to work through. But if you want that real engagement you have to get out there into the community as best
you can. The mayor is very good [and] has regular meetings with people from all faiths. I know the Muslim elders go in and talk to her, and it’s a lot of engagement...You have to make personal contacts so you have that level of understanding."

Wider consultation events run by faith forums among faith communities were also seen to work well as a way of building an evidence base and informing local authority consultations.

In some cases, interviewees commented on the lack of feedback given to them following their involvement in consultation (councillor and faith sector interviewees).

More generally, feedback from consultations has been identified as one of several key elements of effective consultative practice identified by the CLEAR auditing tool for local citizen participation (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker, 2006b).20

This suggests that participation is most successful where citizens:

- Can do – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate
- Like to – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation
- Enabled to – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation
- Asked to – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered

Membership on governing bodies and partnerships

Different approaches are evident in the nature and extent of faith and humanist engagement and representation on governing bodies, committees and strategic partnerships. Among the four case studies, examples were found of faith engagement on a safeguarding children’s board, youth support services, a local authority equality board (which also included membership from a humanist organisation) and two LSPs. The fact that faith and humanist involvement on partnerships varies across councils is consistent with the national picture. A survey undertaken in 2008 (DCLG, 2009, p22), for example, indicates that 58 per cent of LSPs have membership of faith organisations or individuals. The following boxes (two and three) offer examples of faith engagement on governing bodies from among the four case studies.

Box 2: Case study of Barnet safeguarding children’s board (BSCB)

Representation on Barnet safeguarding children's board (BSCB)

The BSCB is a multi-agency group that aims to promote the safety and welfare of all children in Barnet and ensure that children and young people are safe at home, in school and in the community. The Board has various sub-groups, including a faith and cultural group whose remit is to address diversity of needs in relation to supporting children and families and the provision of services to vulnerable adults. The work of this sub-group involves actively seeking to support and promote good practice in the safeguarding of children and vulnerable

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adults among minority ethnic, faith and cultural groups. Having safeguarding ‘champions’ from these communities involved in the Board is seen to help achieve these aims through providing knowledge, expertise and access. It can also help address mistrust and anxiety of statutory services evident within some minority ethnic, faith and cultural groups.

Barnet is also part of the Pan-London Safeguarding Children Culture and Faith Project. This project involves undertaking focus group and online consultations with young people, parents, voluntary and community organisations and workers in local authority social care positions to gather views on their needs and how to improve safeguarding for children.

For more information see http://www.barnet.gov.uk/safeguarding-children-board.htm

Box 3: Case study of Leicester partnership (LSP)

Representation on Leicester partnership

In 2009 Leicester Partnership embarked on a new approach to engaging the VCS. This introduced ‘community of interest’ representation, consisting of 14 seats on the partnership. Two of these places were allocated to faith and religious groups, alongside a further two places for each of the following groups: women’s groups; disability groups; ethnic minority groups; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups; older peoples groups; and youth groups. Their role and responsibilities (referred to as the 5 C’s) are set out in a document called ‘Being a Leicester Partnership Member: Information for VCS groups’, which lists them as follows:

- **Comprehend**: the issues facing organisations they represent and understand the responsibilities, objectives and agenda of the partnership.
- **Consult**: with people in his or her organisation or amongst wider groups (ie faith groups, women’s groups etc) when necessary in order to bring information, issues or recommendations to the partnership.
- **Contribute**: to decision-making on behalf of the community of interest.
- **Communicate**: the role, work and decisions of the partnership back to their communities of interest.
- **Cooperate**: with the delivery of One Leicester, with other partners and with each other.

Until recently the main involvement of faith and other communities of interest groups were on the stronger communities partnership sub-group of the Leicester Partnership. This acted as a strategic umbrella organisation, bringing together the public, community and voluntary sectors to encourage the development of strategies, practices and interventions around community engagement, empowerment, equalities and community cohesion within the partnership. Following a partnership restructure in 2010, the communities of interest representatives now sit on the full partnership Assembly of around 50 to 60 members. One representative also sits on the executive forum to enable input at a more strategic level.
Clarity about the role of faith representatives on partnerships has been identified as a key issue. Escott and Logan (2006, p6), for example, suggested that their role on LSPs was often unclear and was poorly understood by other members. In some cases, the very term ‘faith representative’ is contested and perhaps misleading. Whilst faith actors may be identified as ‘faith representatives’, some consider themselves to be simply people of faith serving on the board (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009). On LSPs the notion of a ‘faith representative’ and who is regarded as ‘the constituency’ can vary. Some, for example, have a remit to speak on behalf of all faith communities in the locality, others act as a general voice for the faith and voluntary and community sectors, and others represent specific organisations or groups, such as VCS umbrella organisations, and/or an Anglican or Roman Catholic diocese. On occasions, faith representatives may also advocate on behalf of an individual where a complaint has been raised21.

Benefits of engaging faith groups in partnerships
Several benefits to councils of engaging faith representatives in partnerships and/or consultations can be identified. According to Escott and Logan (2006, p7) two different, but not mutually exclusive, contributions are apparent: an identity and a faith dimension. The identity dimension involves faith representatives acting or speaking on behalf of a range of constituencies, which may be geographically, ethnicity, culturally or faith-based, or arise out of a shared experience of social marginalisation. Faith representatives can, for example, inform statutory partners on views and issues of concern or situations or services that could be improved. This could involve issues or improvements in the appropriate provision and delivery of public services taking into account diversity of religious and/or cultural needs eg requirements concerning burial, healthcare provision, safeguarding of children, the provision of women’s only swimming, fire safety awareness linked to religious festivals, and parking issues outside a place of worship. It can also help statutory partners monitor and gain a better understanding of issues and tensions within and between communities, such as domestic violence, forced marriage, youth gang culture, inter and intra community tensions, hate crime, and health concerns. As the following quote suggests, it can be difficult for someone outside of an ethnic minority, faith or cultural community to fully understand problems within it and be able to speak legitimately about them. As one Sikh member of an inter-faith forum suggested:

“You don’t know the issues within my community. Even if you know, you cannot talk about them because you will be seen as an outsider.” (Sikh member of an inter-faith forum)

This difficulty is one of the reasons local authority officers gave for engaging with faith groups:

“Their ears are close enough to the ground to have a kind of an understanding and an insight into the issues that you can never have no matter how much you get out and about.” (Council officer)

Council interviewees also commented that engaging faith groups has helped improve the reputation of the local authority and its relationships with the faith sector and VCS, as well as facilitate a better understanding

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21 See also sub-section below for representation in relation to humanist representatives.
among communities of what the council “can or can’t do realistically” (Council officer and elected members). In explaining the rationale for embarking on dialogue with faith leaders, one elected member said:

“[There is a] real feeling that we need to work on good relationships during the good times, so that in the bad times we’ve actually got credit in the bank. And that’s how I explained it to all the faith leaders. I said, ‘if we can’t actually talk to each other now, if things get tough, where will we be?’ So it was a kind of pragmatic thing really based on needing to feel that we were in a relationship with each other and a genuine belief from my own faith that faith has a really valuable part to play in the community and contribute significantly and without them, the town would be considerably poorer.” (Elected member)

The benefits of building relations with faith and belief groups during the ‘good times’ was also highlighted by other interviewees. As one local councillor said:

“People want to talk to you if you are willing; if you just sit down and talk to them. And it’s almost like, well, I’ll try not to use some banal expression like let sleeping dogs lie, ‘oh well, I haven’t heard anything from the mosque so they must be fine, so why would I go there? And my argument is that’s the time you go, when everything’s fine because you make the contact then. If there’s been an issue or difficulty or it’s umm, and you respond to that you are seen as taking sides.”

Faith representatives can also act more generally as an advocate for service users, the marginalised and/or those who lack a voice (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009). One faith representative on an LSP, for example, has made claims on behalf of migrant workers, gypsy and travellers and ‘the poor’ and has been active in developing joint local projects with statutory partners focusing on some of these groups. The fact that faith representatives ‘look out for’ and make specific claims on behalf of particular marginalised groups was also highlighted by a Bishop within the Pentecostal Church on a mental health trust partnership, who stated that whilst he has the interests of everyone at heart, he has a keen eye “for those that are not doing so well”.

Faith representatives may also provide a source of interest representation or access to people who would otherwise be ‘difficult to reach’, for example, due to language, mistrust of statutory partners and/or cultural barriers (see the Barnet Safeguarding Children’s Board example above). Berkeley et al’s study goes so far as to suggest that faith representatives have a unique contribution to bring:

“As those who are usually strongly locally rooted, possibly in touch with and trusted by people and groups often suspicious of ‘officialdom’. They have a good grasp of local issues and priorities. They will be networked with a range of formal and informal community groups, with many of the latter likely to be completely ‘off the radar’ of the local authority.” (2006, p2)

As Chapman and Lowndes (2009) suggest, examples of these ‘off the radar’ groups can include ethnic minority, transient and new migrant communities. Faith representatives’ claims to represent such groups and the wider social concerns of faith communities can be valued on the basis that they offer a different, and sometimes more holistic, perspective compared to other partners.
Speaking about faith representatives, one interviewee commented:

“I think they really have a really good part to play if you have an inclusive forum, if it is this bigger forum. You often find that they may not say a lot, but actually what they do say people will listen to. So they can be quite effective when they need to be in just putting a slightly different view and perspective on things. So we have certainly found in the city they are useful partners around the table, because they don’t think like the classic public sector. They are not coming from a narrow focus where the rest of us might be; either spending money or a business focus. Or, they are thinking at a higher level aren’t they, both in terms of, you know, the community and more holistically.” (local councillor)

Faith representatives are also seen to be free to voice alternative views, which are not constrained by party politics, specific mandates or geographical boundaries (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009; Berkeley et al., 2006, p61). An annual report of One North East partnership, for example, quotes:

“The representatives who are from faith communities have a unique role. We have not got a political axe to grind. We are in contact with residents from all sorts of backgrounds, and we ourselves come from a variety of settings. Our role is not to press our own faith, or way of life, with an LSP, but it is to remind the service providers of the human face of those whose futures they are deciding.” (Churches Agency, cited in Letby, 2007, p5).

In some cases, their claims can be inspired and/or linked in some way to what Baker and Skinner (2005) refer to ‘spiritual capital’, ie theology, worshiping traditions, value systems or moral visions. This is the faith dimension (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009), where representatives seek to ensure that “the sorts of moral values and spiritual vision that faith communities typically cherish are used in such a way as to contribute to the common good” in and through the development and implementation of policy (Escott and Logan, 2006, 9).

However, religious or spiritual connections can sometimes cause anxiety and concern among statutory partners and humanist/ secular groups. As the survey by the Church Urban Fund reveals (Berkeley et al. 2006, p99), 44 per cent of faith representatives indicated that the main LSP partnership on which they sat was not very or not at all open to discussing faith issues. Previous research in Leicester (Lowndes and Chapman, 2007) also suggests that policy-makers and practitioners may be uncomfortable with discussing values head-on, especially where reference is made to religion. Debates around morality may also challenge policy-makers and practitioners because they surface values that are submerged for political reasons (eg the redistributive aspects of some government policy), or because they involve a direct challenge to public policy norms (from equal opportunities to short-term target-driven funding) (Lowndes and Chapman, 2007). In some cases, there may be a predominant secular or atheist culture within a local authority and/or challenges to faith engagement from local authority members or humanist/secular groups. The latter, in particular, have raised concerns that faith groups maybe getting privileged and/or preferential treatment through their access to, and engagement with councils.
That said, many faith representatives appear to adopt a secularised language and input when engaging in partnerships and consultations. As one Christian faith representative on an LSP stated:

“I don’t think you can have a huge faith input. And what I mean by that is the values and principles we feel as important from a Christian perspective, not evangelism. It’s quite difficult to say that in the Board meeting unless you use very careful language...I can say what I think is right about social justice and so on, but I am not quite so strong as saying well it actually links back to a faith statement.”

The same interviewee went on to explain that when speaking about social justice in a partnership context:

“People either want me to turn that [the term social justice] into something very practical, which might be increasing access to information and services so that they [migrant workers] can have equal access. There is not a commitment in that group to say we will campaign for, publically, the group of people that are discriminated against...Civil servants can handle systems which increase public awareness, for example, pushing out leaflets. It’s much more difficult for some organisations to hoist up a flag called social justice...so I have had to change my language a bit.”

Finally, faith and belief groups can also benefit from their engagement with councils, including through:

• communicating and helping statutory partners to better understand the needs and issues of groups and/or individuals; this includes, for example, ethnic minority, faith, non-religious, cultural and marginalised groups
• giving the voluntary, community and faith sector a stronger voice and policy influence
• keeping up to speed with what’s going on in a local area and seeing where and how their social action activities fit into the wider local context
• getting and sharing information, which helps groups involved in social action better identify and address needs and gaps in service provision
• meeting and speaking to people from different sectors, which can help provide further support and resources for social action
• ensuring that the practical contribution of local faith communities is recognised and acknowledged in the formulation and delivery of policy.

**Challenges when engaging faith groups in partnerships**

Consultation and representation of faith groups can be seen as contentious, given their perceived distance from the established precepts of rational political debate, secular and evidence-based public policy, and formal ties of accountability (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009). Their legitimacy in the policy sphere is, for example, challenged by some humanists at the national and local levels, who are anxious that faith groups are being singled out as having “a special importance and being in need of special attention and assistance...to the exclusion of the non-religious” (see British Humanist Association, 2011a). Concerns may also be raised in relation to religious and/or cultural perspectives and values associated with the role of women, abortion,
homosexuality and proselytisation (see also section six). In general, such issues were not found to be significant among the case study areas. Where they did emerge, strategies for dealing with them included: effective conflict management, open and transparent communication and procedures, myth busting and clarity on the role of faith and humanist representation.

Other challenges are associated with the process of representation and accountability. Several interviewees, for example, highlighted difficulties of representing diversity between and within faiths or belief and gave examples of groups they felt are under-represented in partnerships, consultations and inter-faith forums, such as the Turkish Muslim community, some Christian denominations, secular groups and women (council officer, elected members and faith representatives). The following quotes help illustrate associated challenges:

“The communities themselves are very diverse, so you can’t assume that the person you’ve got, will represent that whole sector anyway. And particularly the Jewish communities. There’s a broad spectrum of the Jewish community that ranges from the sort of very liberal end of the spectrum, to the very, very Orthodox end of the spectrum, and lots of different shades in between. So, you know...they wouldn’t represent that whole spectrum in any case.” (Council officer)

“I think it’s a bit easy to just keep focusing, to say, oh we have a Christian perspective, and actually you have an individual’s perspective from one church.” (Freelance project manager)

“I think coming with preconceptions about a faith is dangerous I’ve learnt. You know, people say, ‘Oh, Group X always’, and I’ve found there is no always. But actually there is real diversity within faith and you can’t assume all ‘whoever’ think the same way or have the same views.” (Local councillor)

Representing diversity can be particularly problematic where a representative has a remit to represent ‘all faiths’ in a locality, particularly where political and/or caste divisions exist within and between faith groups. Difficulties in representing diversity and not getting beyond tokenistic involvement were quoted as reasons for not engaging faith representatives in LSPs. In such cases, faith groups were engaged on a more ad-hoc or informal basis with a view to drawing upon their expertise. It has also led some partners to challenge the legitimacy of faith representatives in decision-making (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009). Some faith representatives themselves have also expressed a sense of unease with the expectation among partners that they represent all followers of their respective faiths. In practice, such individuals may make a variety of claims when engaged in dialogue with statutory partners, some of which may be of a representative nature ie speaking or advocating on behalf of others, and others which may be based on their own personal or organisational expertise, perspective or experience. For this reason, when assessing legitimacy, it may be more useful to make an assessment on the claims a faith or humanist representative makes at a given time rather than assume or judge the individual is representative or otherwise more generally.

Many council officers and faith representatives are aware and realistic about the limitations and capacity for effective representation of all faiths and prefer to view their engagement as offering some kind of...
faith and/or cultural perspective. One council officer, for example, went on to explain:

“I think you know, you can only do work with who you’ve got really and you’re never going to absolutely reach everybody. But it’s about bringing that perspective and you know, certainly the person we’ve got, would be very well placed to, you know, provide a perspective, or at least be a sort of channel of communication if we need to know something particular... We can be pointed in the right direction.”

Similarly a Christian faith representative commented:

“I see myself as representing the whole of the voluntary community and faith sector. I’ve got a meeting next week...that’s to do with the CAFs, the Common Assessment Frameworks for child abuse... And I am the VCFS (voluntary, community and faith sector) representative on that. And I sit there and say, ‘I can’t represent anyone’. And that’s one of the problems, because I am THE representative. And I don’t know what the...scout group’s doing. And it’s the same right across all the LSPs. So all you can really do is to try to pull yourself back slightly and say...‘I’m going to try and look at it from a voluntary organisational point of view’. And that’s what I try to do. Doesn’t always work, but you try to get yourself one level above the table, if I can put it that way. So you’re not sat there at the table as yourself. You’re not sat there representing your own organisation, but you’re sat there just that bit above it.” (Christian faith representative)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Dinham (2009, p169) who suggests that the aim of faith representatives in relation to partnerships should be to ‘give voice to the general issues and perspectives which having a faith might bring’. Although it is understood that there is little or no relationship between representatives and the whole constituency of faiths, one role of faiths on local authority boards is to ensure that faith is a remembered dimension in community decision-making and policy implementation.

Other steps have also been taken to help address the issue of diversity and provide a means of accountability and communication back to communities. Some partnerships, for example, have two faith representatives on their structures. Others have provided guidance, training and capacity building to faith representatives to help support and build up their confidence to engage. Membership and the connectedness of faith representatives to networks, organisations and inter-faith forums can also provide a means of accountability and communication back to communities. According to the Church Urban Fund survey (Berkeley et al., 2006, p96) 76 per cent of faith representatives felt their membership of organisations and networks helped support their role on public partnerships. There are a number of ways in which they do so, such as:

- Acting as a nominating body for faith representatives, and therefore providing some form of authorisation from within the faith community

- Providing a forum in which people can discuss issues and advise faith representatives of different perspectives or a common position to take on a particular subject

- Presenting opportunities for members to hold faith representatives to account.

22 In some cases, faith and VCS representatives are elected by VCS umbrella organisations.
The most commonly used methods of communication and accountability tend to be informal and ad-hoc, including face-to-face, telephone or email conversations, local events related to faith and civic organisations and informal meetings (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009). Public meetings and newsletters are also used, but much less frequently. One Sikh faith representative suggested that feedback to communities is not done in a professional or formal way, but happens from time to time. The interviewee went on to say that formal mechanisms of accountability would fail as there is not enough time or resource. The interviewee also noted that faith representatives can and are challenged by people within their communities where there is disagreement. This can happen, for example, when such representatives are quoted in the media.

Clearly, there are no guarantees over when and how communication and accountability will happen, and it is not clear how easy it is to impose sanctions should the actions of a faith representative be considered unsatisfactory (Chapman and Lowndes, 2009). Even where faith representatives seek to be accountable, they do not always get feedback. In many cases the availability of an active, interested or willing ‘audience’ appears limited to other faith or VCS representatives and/or to a few members of single and inter-faith organisations. One Christian faith representative explained that you have to accept you cannot engage everyone. You do the best you can, but:

“Don’t spend huge amounts of time, because we are all busy, and certainly don’t lumber people with stuff they don’t want, because all it does is confirm that the county council are wasting time...[people question]... ‘why am I receiving an email or letter asking me to let that stranger know what I think about youth provision in my area? It does not make sense’!”

Lack of resources and capacity can also hinder engagement with councils, and communication and accountability with the wider community, particularly when faith representation and engagement is undertaken in a voluntary and/or unfunded capacity. As one Buddhist faith representative commented:

“Councils sometimes don’t appreciate that many people within faith communities are not paid by their faith communities... They maybe have a job [elsewhere]...or have to maintain their own core business [eg worship services, pastoral support, social action]...So it is impossible to get involved in everything that we might want to.”

Berkeley et al. (2006) go as far to suggest that some people in faith communities may not even know that they have a faith representative. Perhaps even more revealing is that between 45 and 46 per cent of faith representatives stated in a survey that they did not feel they adequately represented or are accountable to their local faith community, compared to between 54 and 55 per cent who felt they did (Berkeley et al., 2006, p100). As one Sikh representative commented:

“If I think I am accountable to all the Sikh centres, I am not. They don’t consider me as accountable to them because, number one, we have to think of those organisations that don’t understand the concept of organisations, the structure.”

The fact that many faith representatives and leaders are older and male also suggests that, unless they are well networked into
young people’s and women’s groups, they may not be considered to offer such an authentic voice for these groups23.

Who to engage and how to find them: an ‘ideal’ representative?

Decisions about who to engage, how and to what extent bring up questions of inclusion and exclusion, and the significance attached to difference and identities. As the above discussion shows, the extent and nature of faith and belief engagement across councils varies. In some areas the engagement of faith and belief groups was described as being reactive rather than proactive, or was seen as lip service (councillor interviewees). In the words of one interviewee:

“I do think that the council’s overall opinion is that faith is important to individuals. It’s not important to the council unless there’s some difficulty created by it, some worry.” (Local councillor)

The same councillor argued that local authority engagement with religion and belief may be limited to equalities requirements and the PVE agenda: the faith dimension is not necessarily explicit in strategic plans. Feelings across faith representatives varied, with a Muslim interviewee claiming that their local authority understands the needs of faith communities, and a Jewish interviewee suggesting that faith groups may not be consulted unless the issue is seen as a ‘faith issue’. Differences in the level of engagement across faith communities can also arise, with one local councillor, for example, reporting perceptions that the local authority ‘talks to Muslim groups, but not other faiths’.

At the same time, other interviewees have raised the possibility that there has been too much focus on faith as a dimension in the policy context, although they recognise that faith is important to many people and, in some cases, value local authority engagement with faith groups. Some humanists, for example, argue that the question on religious affiliation in the census, which policy decisions may reflect, over estimates the importance of religious identity as it is likely to include those with a cultural, rather than a strong and active affiliation to religion (British Humanist Association 2011b). One officer also suggested that cultural identity, as opposed to faith, is often more important although the two are often mistakenly interchanged. This contrasts with an officer in another area, who argued that faith is one of the most important defining characteristics in their borough, particularly given the diversity of religions. A councillor further warned that too much focus on faith can heighten a sense of ‘the other’ which is not always constructive to facilitating good relations. Similarly, an officer cautioned against an over-emphasis on faith in relation to integration and cohesion, suggesting that:

“Interfaith work plays an important part in cohesion, but of course...there’s a danger of over emphasising faith and community cohesion. If you look at the sort of demographics of the city, I should think the large majority of people are not people of faith...and there’s a danger that you can end up sending a message to them that cohesion is about faith/race. And of course it’s not.”

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A survey commissioned by the Church Urban Fund suggests that the majority of ‘faith representatives’ on LSPs are invited on to the main board (60 per cent) rather than elected (40 per cent) (Berkeley et al., 2006). Finding and knowing who to invite has been described as a “judgement call” (council officer). It can in some cases be very easy, for example where a trusted, experienced and well connected faith leader is available. Or it can be challenging. Lack of access of local authority officers and councillors to faith and/or cultural communities, as well as lack of time, capacity, interest, knowledge on the part of officers or councillors, and mistrust among faith groups of statutory partners and their work can all act as barriers to recruitment, especially on sensitive topics. Some people do not see the point of going to a meeting. Attempts to address recruitment issues have involved inviting faith and cultural groups to seminars and workshops with a view to identifying potential ‘champions’ or community leaders.

As for whom to engage, council officers identified the following qualities as being important:

- a charismatic and powerful figure in the faith and/or VCS
- well connected to various organisations and networks and has a good reputation
- relevant expertise and knowledge
- good personal networking and communication skills
- does not claim to speak on behalf of all faiths or even all traditions within their own faith, yet has enough understanding to be aware of many of the issues
- is able to maintain a level of independence from statutory partners, ie not be seen as a government or council ‘pet’.

One officer went on to say:

“We tend to talk about the ‘Muslim community’ which is a huge mistake...it’s a very diverse community, and you know just labelling people because of their faith is often a mistake in terms of understanding them as sort of rounded individuals but having said that we can never engage, I can never engage with 40,000 people who are that diverse...You know although they might all be Muslims that’s probably the only thing they might have in common...but because we haven’t got that capacity for engagement, what you rely on is people who have got that capacity for engagement but who wouldn’t claim I speak...with 40,000 voices of the Muslims. You know that, if someone starts telling you that, you have to absolutely ‘close your ears’... So they have that kind of humility that they themselves don’t necessarily have the, you know, the ear of 40,000 people but, on the other hand, their ears are close enough to the ground to have a kind of an understanding and an insight into the issues that you can never have no matter how much you get out and about.”

(Council officer)

It may be important to find and speak to a range of representatives/people and, in some cases, go through ‘gate-keepers’, as the following quotes suggest:

“There are leaders in all different places. So, you know, the mosque committee are very influential but only up to a point, there are certain groups they don’t speak for and certain issues that you wouldn’t speak to them about. So you go to other people really.... How did I know who to go to? I just went to lots of things and I found out who was influential in what area and, you know...I just found out who people listened
to and who they don’t. The same in other, in residents’ groups” (Elected member)

“It is very important to understand different communities work in different ways. The Muslim community has a great respect for elders, and you wouldn’t go in underneath the way that they organise their community and start to talk below the elder level without at least having spoken to the elders…it’s about respect and understanding.” (Council officer).

Good inter-personal and communication skills of officers and councillors engaging with faith groups are important, as the following interviewee suggests:

“In sort of short, I think it is about skills and abilities, competencies within our own organisation linking up with the similar skills and competencies around networking and engagement and sort of intelligent negotiations sometimes within the voluntary and community sector itself and faith sector as part of that.” (Council officer)

Statutory authorities can sometimes find it difficult to approach a faith or cultural group if they don’t know anybody. They may initially face mistrust or suspicion about ‘what’s in it for the council’. As one Sikh representative said about a new encounter: “the first time and second time, people [within the faith community] are very inward or they just say ‘who is that person?’” It can be useful to have a contact, such as a councillor from the same faith background, who can help facilitate an introduction. Once introduced, local authority officers and/or councillors can begin to establish their own contacts. It can also be useful to be clear about ‘what’s in it for them’.

As one local authority employee said:

“You’ve got to have someone...who can identify opportunities with win/win, because there is no point in me saying to you come on let’s work together, we can do this and whatever, I have got to show you what’s in it for you.”

Engaging humanist and secular groups

The formal engagement of humanist groups in local authority consultations and partnerships is patchy. According to one humanist interviewee, being invited to participate on governing bodies as a humanist is a key challenge; the local authority is not consulting all sectors of the community on an equal basis. It tends to consult faith groups more than humanist groups. Some local authority officers suggest that humanist or secular groups are not particularly active in their area and/or that their approach and position may need to change for them to be seen as legitimate partners. In the words of one officer:

“I suppose we haven’t really thought about issues like the council or the partnership in terms of engaging the secular. It hasn’t been an issue...There’s not a very vibrant body of people [organised around secularity] there.”

Yet, one debate raised in relation to faith engagement surrounds the potential for engaging and accounting for the needs of non-religious people (see box four for an example of a forum in which this takes place). As one council officer commented: “We are conscious of the dangers of not including secularists or people of no religion”.

24 See section on benefits of faith and belief engagement for ways in which they can benefit.
Some interviewees see representation of non-religious needs as inherent in the policy process generally or “there by definition” (Council officer), whereas others see a potential role for humanist groups, for example, in representing the concept of non-religious beliefs and/or acting as a reminder that there are people that do not believe in religious doctrine. According to a national policy-maker, humanism itself has a potential contribution through challenging:

“The more extravagant fantasies of faith that, you know, religion can do anything because God is on its side... That explicit sense of a value base that is not rooted in religious revelation is an important contribution of humanists. I think it has a really important and a catalytic role in reflection about values in the public arena, including sheer political ones, you know, what kind of political settlement do we want at the local [and national] level, and... what is a good society.”

Humanist representatives described their role and contribution as such:

“I think as a humanist... we try and be good people, we try to lead good lives and create a good society. We’re basically there to represent the vast majority, the ordinary public to see that good rational decision making process takes place.” (Humanist representative)

“I represent not people, but the concept of non-religious beliefs I suppose.” (Humanist representative)

Some interviewees felt that the engagement of humanist groups could be beneficial alongside faith groups provided there was recognition of shared values between humanist and faith worldviews (eg around working for the good of society, peace and justice) as opposed to an aggressive anti-religious or humanist stance. One humanist representative also felt there was a role to be played in holding statutory partners to account under the principle of fairness eg by ensuring religious groups do not automatically gain what Furbey (2006, p28) refers to as “un-interrogated political privilege and power” on the basis of their faith. At the national level, the British Humanist Association seeks to “represent and support the interests of ethically concerned, non-religious people in the UK” and campaigns for “an end to religious privilege”, “discrimination based on religion or belief”, and for a secular state (British Humanist Association, 2011a). Even so, whilst there is potential for humanist organisations to represent humanists and/or non-religious views, not all non-religious people would identify themselves as humanists (Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource, 2005) and questions arise as to the extent to which their claims would be viewed as legitimate by these people and/or statutory partners25.

Box 4: Case study of One Watford equality panel

One Watford equality panel

One Watford Equality Panel was set up to support the council to achieve equality and diversity objectives in the provision of services. It provides an opportunity for the council’s equalities work to be reviewed and scrutinised by individuals with equalities interests and community organisations external to the council. It also provides a source of consultation and information relating to equalities groups. The following

25 Such questions also arise in relation to faith representatives’ claims.
organisations are represented: Watford Humanist Association, Watford Muslim Project, Watford Indian Association, Watford Chinese Association, Watford Talking Newspaper, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Watford Women’s Centre and Watford Deaf Club. The meetings are chaired by the Mayor and supported by the Head of Strategic Services and the council’s Corporate Equalities Officer.

As can be seen, the equality panel includes membership of both faith based and humanist organisations, alongside others. This is seen to be beneficial in offering a balance of perspectives and in providing a formal avenue for both faith and humanist organisations to engage with the council. Humanist representation, in particular, is valued in terms of offering a voice or perspective relating to those with non religious beliefs. Training for the panel has enhanced understanding of the representative role, namely offering challenge and feedback relating to a community wide, as opposed to individual or organisational, perspective.

Again, issues of representing diversity can emerge. As one humanist interviewee explained:

“Well I sometimes feel a bit uncomfortable about trying to represent 17 per cent of non religious people in [name of location]... Because I accept, as we were saying before, I accept that a lot of them are not actually, haven’t reached their atheism in the way that we have. They simply have been brought up in a household where there’s been no religion...They have no concept of God, they haven’t rejected God because they’ve never attempted to embrace God. People like humanists or most seculars are actually people with that religious experience. I mean I don’t think I’ve ever met, well very rarely met, someone who was born and raised an atheist.” (Humanist representative)

Even among humanist and secularist groups it is important to recognise diversity of views, interests, backgrounds and resources. For one council officer, the key to engaging both faith and humanist groups is to ‘get the balance right’ as one of several stakeholders and voices:

“Both personally and professionally I would see the faith and humanist groups as, as I say, pluralistically as one of our stakeholders. So in terms of their voice, it’s difficult. I would want it to be heard and out there, and taken into account, but not at the expense of other voices. So I guess that’s the balance, about how you allow their voices [to be heard]... without outweighing other voices from other groups that have equally legitimate democratic rights.” (Council officer)
6. Funding and commissioning faith based social action

Financial support to civil society organisations by councils has traditionally taken the form of grant funding, ie where a specific amount of funding is given to an organisation to undertake a particular activity. More recently, public sector reforms have led to increasing moves towards commissioning, involving a process whereby councils assess the needs of the locality or client group and arrange to meet relevant service delivery activities through a procurement process. This can involve awarding grants and/or contracts to civil society organisations. All of the councils participating in this study had provided funding to FBOs through a variety of funding streams and programmes, including: community cohesion, preventing violent extremism, connecting communities, equalities, children’s services and festivals and events. In some cases, funding was provided to local inter-faith bodies for activities such as diversity training, education, integration and cohesion events, PVE and supporting faith representatives on LSPs. At the national level, a survey conducted by LGA (2008) found that 38 per cent of participating councils had made grants to local inter-faith bodies in 2007/8, compared to 50 per cent that had not.

In each case study area, funding is not available for religious activities, which might for example include building or improving a mosque, church or temple. Eligible projects were those that met local authority priorities. Other criteria often included having a multi-faith or integration/cohesion dimension and/or some form of wider community value. The following quotes illustrate this:

“You have to meet objectives, you have to show how you meet the council priorities etc... Within the new commissioning framework, we make it very clear what people have to do in order to achieve some grant funding. There are some other smaller pots, like the mayor has some funding etc. But even then we’d expect it to be just to meet those priorities, and also it has to have a wider impact as opposed to just getting a group going. It would have to show that it’s delivering something that had a wider community impact.” (Local authority officer)

“Anything that looks multi-faith and inclusive would tend to be favoured. And that’s, I guess that would be a generic thing anyway. Anything that looks like partnership tends to be a more positive and fundable activity, because you know you achieve all the economy, the economies of working together, you know you’re improving community cohesion. There’s all those sort of spin offs that come from that.” (Freelance project manager)

“People who have single faith organisations are not likely to get funded” (Local authority officer)

The following boxes (five to seven) offer examples of activities that are supported by councils in the case study areas.
Box 5: Case study of the Muslim Burial Council of Leicestershire

The Muslim Burial Council of Leicestershire

A community leader, active in the city for more than 20 years, identified a need for improved services in line with his Islamic requirements for burial to take place as soon as possible within 24 hours after death. Following an approach to Leicester City Council, the leader consulted widely with different mosques and sections of the Muslim community (drawing on his existing networks), organising an event at which the issues were discussed, along with a specific proposal to establish a new organisation with the specific remit to liaise with the City Council on the matter. This marked the beginning of what subsequently became the Muslim Burial Council of Leicestershire (MBCOL), which is responsible for securing improved burial services for the Muslim community, including 24/7 availability of burial facilities, including access to council officials on Saturdays. In 1995, the MBCOL signed a legal agreement with Leicester City Council, the first of its kind in Europe, which gave it delegated authority to carry out administrative tasks and work with statutory partners to enable early burial to take place. The MBCOL, and its original founder, have been key parties in consultations with statutory partners on issues of burial and the handling of deceased bodies, including central and local government, NHS hospitals, ambulance services, city and county registrar’s offices, HM Coroners and Leicestershire Constabulary. As a non-sectarian organisation that draws on membership from every mosque and various Muslim community organisations in Leicestershire, the MBCOL is able to access the majority of the Muslim community in that area. Greater access to registration and burial services has also been welcomed beyond the Muslim community.

For more information see website (www.mbcol.org.uk) or contact MBCOL at admin@mbcol.org.uk. For further information on beliefs and practices concerning death and bereavement among different belief groups see Nagdi, S. (2011) Discovering Through Death: Beliefs and Practices, Leicester: Muslim Burial Council of Leicestershire.

Box 6: Case study of Building bridges Pendle

Building bridges Pendle

Building Bridges Pendle is an interfaith organisation and a registered charity that works closely with Pendle Borough Council, which has provided funding to support its core activities. The main aims of the organisation are to:

- ‘advance the education of the public in the study of religion of all denominations and creeds, in particular, but not exclusively, with reference to the Christian and Islamic faiths
- work towards the elimination of racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different racial and faith groups
- bring a realisation that diversity is a positive aspect in the make-up of our society, and promote differences in culture and faith as richness
- be aware of similarities in our identity as citizens of a multi-cultural and multi-faith country.’ (LGA, 2008).
Building Bridges Pendle has been in operation for over 10 years, during which time it has undertaken various activities to create new opportunities for people (including religious people, atheists and humanists) to come together and learn from each other. These include: cultural awareness events, focused on celebrating diversity through arts and culture; organising social trips bringing families together to encourage cross cultural relationships in more ‘natural’ and fun settings; undertaking educational work in schools and mosques that link to the Citizenship curriculum and that examine what makes a ‘good citizen’; pioneering a Church and Mosque twinning model which seeks to build closer friendships between religious leaders and worshiping communities (see Christian-Muslim Forum, 2009); and organising and facilitating inter-faith seminars and local community conversations on various topics (see box one above). In addition to shaping the LSP’s approach to cohesion and supporting good governance within charitable organisations, Building Bridges Pendle has been engaged in PVE work. This has involved designing capacity building and education with Mosques and Madrasahs, and offering a toolkit to raise awareness and understanding of violent extremism in schools as well as helping them to become more resilient to extremism (see DCSF, 2008). The organisation and its work have been widely recognised for good and innovative practice and for making a significant contribution to interfaith, social cohesion, integration and PVE (see Building Bridges website; LGA, 2008). By working with Building Bridges Pendle, the Borough Council has made progress towards its cohesion and integration objectives, expanded its networks and reach, benefited from a more centralised way of ‘getting messages’ out to people, and been able to encourage and facilitate collaborative social action between groups.

For more information about Building Bridges Pendle, please visit: www.buildingbridgespendle.org.uk.

Box 7: Case study of Connecting Communities in Barnet

Connecting Communities in Barnet

Barnet Council has been working closely with faith groups in delivering projects and activities funded through DCLG’s connecting communities programme. This programme sought to promote cohesion and address alienation amongst some sections of communities in deprived areas. In Barnet, the projects focused on working through Christian Churches to help empower disenfranchised white working class communities though, for example, activities aimed at strengthening young people’s aspirations and expectations of themselves. In working together, both the council and churches have faced a number of challenges, including a short time scale in which to spend the funds, anxiety by others around the funding of faith-based organisations and cultural differences in working practices. Key lessons learnt when working with the VCS and faith sector include the need to go out, meet and develop a good understanding of local faith based and secular organisations with a view to undertaking co-production and joint working; factor in time to build trusting relationships, acquire new skills and develop effective and sustainable community projects, particularly for new activities; learn more about sector differences in cultural and organisational practices and allow time for adaptation eg...
Faith and belief in partnership

for faith based organisations to learn funding jargon and processes and adapt working practices in ways that do not betray their goals and values; take appropriate risks with small amounts of funding in order to try new and innovative approaches.

For more information about Connecting Communities in Barnet, please email Julie Pal: julie.pal@barnet.gov.uk

Some councils may help fund religious festivals and celebrations, such as Diwali, Eid and Christmas. However, these must demonstrate cohesion aims and objectives and go beyond a single faith community. As one local authority officer explained:

“We’ve got criteria, which are around community cohesion, and actually organisations often put in bids because they want to do some kind of religious activity. They want to sort of, you know, celebrate a festival or whatever and we won’t fund them for that. If they want to celebrate a religious festival but they want to bring other groups in, in order to help them to learn about [a] kind of religious/social activity, then that helps because it’s about sharing; sharing that culture across the sort of cultural boundaries...So it’s the cross cultural part that’s really important.” (Local authority officer)

In addition to meeting cohesion aims, the officer explained that funding religious festivals on this basis can help build good relations with faith groups and avoid feelings of alienation where faith is an important part of that group’s identity:

“You can end up being out of tune...with the issues that they [faith groups] identify with. I mean you know really if your most powerful sense of identity comes from your faith, then it can alienate groups to sort of say ‘well we’re not actually interested in your faith, we’re interested in some other social issues’. Then that can sort of create...a bit of a tension. We counterbalance that by putting resource into doing things like funding festivals and events. So it would be hard to claim that we are ignoring, or not supporting people in celebrating their cultures or faith. So, but for things like community cohesion and prevent we have to be very careful that we’re not just seen to be funding a religious activity for its own sake.” (Local authority officer)

The benefits and contribution of faith based social action, which in some cases form a rationale for local authority support, include:

- helping the local authority to achieve its priorities by drawing on the resources and goodwill of faith groups
- reaching hard to reach communities, and providing culturally and/or spiritually sensitive or targeted services or activities; some people may trust faith-based provision and organisations more than statutory services
- being able to respond more quickly to needs than statutory partners.

In relation to responding more quickly to needs, one member of a FBO that does not receive public sector funding commented:

“We don’t have to go through all the rigmarole of red tape that the statutory organisations go through. All we have to do is have agreement from our church reps. We can actually step ahead. And we can be ahead of the game, and faster at responding to something than sometimes the...statutory bodies can.” (Christian member of a FBO)
Several interviewees commented on approaches to local authority funding and support for faith based social action. When asked to describe what works well, one member of a FBO recommended starting with relatively small projects rooted in community development principles, such as capacity building, working together and participation. Such projects are likely to have stronger foundations. A local authority officer also outlined the use of prototyping, which uses an iterative approach to service design in which ideas and approaches are first tested on a small scale before implementing the model through a medium-term plan. The advantage of this approach was that faith-based service providers can directly influence the service re-design rather than simply implement a model developed by the local authority.

Some interviewees expressed frustration and difficulties about councils’ funding arrangements shifting from grant aid to contracting and commissioning. It was felt that some organisations did not have the necessary skills to respond to this shift. Grant aid was seen, in some cases, to have helped create funding dependency of some VCS organisations whose future is now under threat from funding cuts (see below). One local authority interviewee suggested it is important to have a mix of contracting and grant aid funding. The interviewee expressed concern that too much focus on contracts and too little on grant aid could result in the loss of smaller community development type activities and groups that would not be eligible, suitable or would not want to seek funding under a commissioning/contract style framework. It was also felt that it is important to involve faith groups, alongside other VCS groups, in the setting of priorities for commissioning and in the delivery of services where there is no conflict of interest. One local authority interviewee also pointed out that, following the Comprehensive Spending Review, many councils need to become better at targeting finite public resources, and that commissioning is being used to achieve this outcome.

In addition to funding, councils have given non-financial support for faith based social action (see box eight below for an example). This includes the use of buildings and office space, attendance at events by local authority officers and councillors, and the sharing of information and expertise. In some cases, the sharing of information has helped signpost faith groups to other resources and enabled them to better assess service delivery gaps and needs. Examples of types of non-financial support that are particularly valued by faith based organisations include good practice case studies and one-to-one tailored advice, coaching and mentoring designed to help an organisation with their particular situation.

Box 8: Case study of street angels in Watford

**Street Angels in Watford**

The Street Angels programme in Watford (similar to Street Pastors) was set up by Watford Town Centre Chaplaincy and is run by a team of volunteers who provide ‘on street’ contact support for anyone in need during the hours that night clubs open. This is seen as a practical expression of Christ’s love to all people and also an expression of their love for the town of Watford. The work of the volunteers may involve helping those experiencing homelessness, intoxication, substance abuse and/or any other issue.
which causes personal distress or has the potential to cause physical harm to themselves or others. Whilst the project has not received public funding, it has received support and advice from the local authority and police, with whom they work closely with. The commitment, support and understanding of statutory partners has been important in helping Street Angels provide a more effective and integrated service. The independence of the project from public funding has also enabled the Street Angels to respond more quickly to changing needs than would otherwise have been possible. Similar projects have been set up in other areas, including Bradford, Halifax, Manchester, Wakefield and York.

For more information about Street Angels in Watford, please see Watford Town Centre Chaplaincy website (http://www.watfordtcc.org/1.html) or contact Richard Chewter, office@watfordtcc.org

Several problems or challenges were highlighted by interviewees in connection with local authority support of faith based social action. These include:

- resistance to engagement as a result of fears and anxieties within councils around funding of faith based social action
- perceptions of other groups around funding of faith based social action
- funding timescales, bureaucracy, cuts and austerity measures.

Concerns have sometimes been raised among practitioners and policy-makers about faith groups using public funds for religious purposes, proselytising and about equalities issues, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Survey research by Fentener et al (2008, p44-45), for example, found that a quarter of faith-based organisations “cited government apprehension or lack of interest in engaging with faith groups as one of the main barriers to the relationship” between them. Anxiety around funding faith based organisations, and the need for a more sophisticated view of when it is appropriate to fund them, was recognised at the national level. Several interviewees in this study also reported that progress has been made towards overcoming such anxieties, but that more needed to be done. One interviewee commented that:

“Some councils are very switched on and others aren’t at all...Sometimes within councils there’s a culture of thinking faith is, you know, a funny subject on the side as it were, and feeling uneasy about dealing with it. So that inhibits an awareness to see a faith group saying we’d like to run something for older people in our community or whatever as being a legitimate thing. That’s not as extensive as it was, and there’s been a lot of work done...to try and address that, but it is still around.” (Freelance consultant working with faith and VCS)

The same interviewee also reported ignorance and wariness by faith and belief groups of local politics and government, and a need for people to broker the relationship between them. In the case study areas, this brokering role has been played by faith forums, together with individual councillors and officers with an interest or remit around inclusion, cohesion, PVE and faith or belief.

In the context of public sector funding, challenges can arise where it is not clear as to what counts as proselytisation in relation to supported activities. Does, for example, having a Bible present at a lunch club or
saying a prayer at the start of a citizenship class count? A number of interviewees in this study also commented that evangelism may form a motive, albeit to different degrees, for some faith groups in undertaking outreach work.

However, anxieties over proselytisation and equalities were not felt to be a major concern by interviewees involved in funding or undertaking faith based social action in this particular study. Reasons given for this include: clarity around not funding religious activity; and the presence of local authority staff and councillors, whether religious or not, with an understanding of the contribution and manner in which faith based social action is undertaken. However, efforts have been made in some localities to address anxieties associated with funding faith based organisations in the past. In such cases, anxieties were associated more with Christian based social action, as opposed to that of other faith groups. In one locality, for example, it was felt that 'lip service' had been paid to being inclusive, in the sense that ethnic minority faith groups were recognised in funding terms whilst Christian based social action was excluded. One elected member commented when referring to a Christian faith based organisation providing outreach work, night shelters and day centres for the homeless:

“[There was] this idea that, you know, they’d [the clients] have to, in order to get their crust for the night, they’d have to say their prayers, you know, and that was just so ...forced. And so you just had to work with that really and just keep reassuring people that, you know, Christians believe that their Christianity comes out about, they don’t need to be evangelical about it, you know, that’s the point, it’s what we do for free service.”
(Elected member)

Strong leadership, good communication, relationship and trust building (see section eight), together with improved understanding of the motivations, contribution and functioning of FBOs were significant in helping to overcome anxieties. This was further strengthened by “myth busting”, “demonstrating outcomes” of faith based social action eg through case studies; conceptualising relevant faith based organisations as part of the wider VCS rather than treating them as “exotic” or “odd”; and reassurances from local authority officers, elected members and faith groups that it isn’t about conversion where this is the case. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of having someone to help broker conversations and made a distinction in relation to the motives of some faith groups in undertaking outreach work, for example:

“I think the conversations need to be brokered, you know confidently and intelligently, about what you know, what is acceptable to do and what is not acceptable to do within the context of what you are delivering with the money or with the time or with the assets that you are being given. As I say the mature, confident faith groups will deliver, they will be themselves. They will be open and honest about what they believe and then they will allow people to be drawn to that faith element because of what they’ve seen them deliver. I mean the Salvation Army and others are very good at this, you know they do give work to anyone. It doesn’t matter you know if people then come on a Sunday or ask more questions; that’s great, but it’s not, it’s not about evangelism when it comes down to it. It’s about, you know serving the poor and needy at heart, and I think some groups will find that easier than others.”
One member of a FBO also gave the following advice to faith groups in helping them to reassure councils:

“It starts with building a relationship with somebody who has authority within it. And showing them that you are going to do what you say you are going to do. And laying down quite clearly in your paperwork, and in your publicity, that you are about caring and serving and listening, and not about proselytizing. So we talk about having a listening ear, someone you can come and talk to, confidentiality, and all that sort of stuff. And then say to people, ‘Give us a chance. Give us chance to put a project into place, and if at the end of that, you don’t like it or we compromise that, then you can tell us to go’.” (Christian member of a FBO)

A faith representative also highlighted a need for faith groups to do more to engage with councils, ie in terms of:

“Not going along and saying, ‘we are here, give us some money.’ Not going along and saying, ‘we are here, listen to our special case, because we are a faith group.’ But just going along and saying, ‘we are here, how can we work together?’” (Faith representative, Christian)

Also relevant here is a quality assurance programme, called VISIBLE, that has been piloted by the Faith based Regeneration Network in partnership with Community Matters, the Church Urban Fund and Goldsmiths College (University of London). This offers an accredited quality assurance assessment tool and kite mark to community organisations meeting specific high standards in management and organisational practice. The programme seeks to help faith groups to be confident about their faith values and ethos when promoting their work to potential funders and partners, and better communicate their contribution to community development and cohesion in ways that are recognised by statutory partners26.

Tensions can also arise from perceptions among other groups of faith groups being privileged through dialogue with and/or funding from councils. Challenges of this nature have been made by humanist groups, and non-Muslim faith groups in the context of PVE funding. For some local authority officers and elected members, part of the problem is that people outside the council do not see or fully understand the criteria on which funding decisions have been made. They suggest part of the solution lies with having very clear and transparent funding guidelines, criteria and processes on which decisions are made and communicating these where appropriate. As one local authority officer commented:

“I guess if you are giving lots of money to a particular group you have to be very clear about what the expectation is, what the nature of that relationship is and why; in the same way as you would do with any tender or any other partner process but perhaps more so if it’s a faith group. So I think transparency around what you are doing and communication with other groups about what you are doing is important...you know, balancing, managing expectations of others and making sure it’s abundantly clear how the process is gone about and why you came to that conclusion.” (Local authority officer)

26 For more information see http://www.visiblecommunities.org.uk/ and http://tinyurl.com/brwfn6v
See also Dinham et al (2011) for a research report on assessing quality in faith based social action.
At least two interviewees commented that any guidance over funding should cover all groups, whether faith based or not, rather than having specific protocols or guidance for faith based groups. For one elected member, ensuring that everyone is on a level playing field and are all playing by the same rules was important. Making out that faith groups are somehow different and play by different rules can result in increased anxiety around funding.

As might be expected, short-term funding timescales, bureaucracy, cuts and austerity measures were raised as key challenges. Several local authority interviewees reported that a funding dependency culture was still prevalent among faith and wider VCS organisations. According to one faith representative, early in 2011 some VCS and faith organisations were still, and in their view mistakenly, thinking that there will be another grant after their current one runs out. The importance of early, honest and transparent communication by councils with faith and VCS groups was highlighted. Several councils have held events with these groups to help work through funding challenges and respond to the localism and Big Society agendas (see also section seven on funding issues relating to the Big Society). One local authority has decided not to cut funding to the VCS over the next year in order to give organisations time to plan and attempt to build sustainability. An elected member also raised the problem that many faith and VCS organisations need to apply to different pots of funding simultaneously.

This can create difficulties in meeting different funding objectives, targets and processes. It was felt that more streamlining and joint funding pots between statutory partners and/or different tiers of government could help overcome this.

7. A role for faith groups in the big society?

At least seven interviewees expressed a lack of clarity and clear understanding over what the Big Society concept means and how it might be achieved. Essentially it was regarded as a set of loose and very general ideas associated with increased volunteering, civic responsibility, collective action, working together for the common good and empowerment of the VCS. With some caveats relating to challenges (see below), these ideas are generally viewed positively by many interviewees. It was also felt that they would encourage councils to think more about how they can better work with the VCS and faith sectors. Many interviewees, both within councils and the faith sector, see a significant role for faith groups in the Big Society. This stems, in part, from their values and ethos, expertise and knowledge of local areas, capacity to mobilise volunteers and collective action, role in providing culturally sensitive and targeted services, ability to ‘do more with less’, and potential to act as a critical friend to statutory partners and policy-makers. In fact, several suggested that this is what the faith sector has been ‘doing for years’. The following quotes help illustrate this:

“We obviously have a very huge role in the sort of Big Society, whatever that really means...But certainly I think we’ve a lot to say and a lot to offer. And when you consider the number of churches and the number of people who do go to the churches, here in [name of area] we reckon that’s about 7000 people. That’s a big base of people. And they have the ability to be a great volunteer base as well; working and serving the community in whatever way that may be.” (Member of a faith based organisation)

“They’re already doing a lot of work....you know, the services that they are already providing....When you scratch the surface and you find out what actually is out there, there’s hundreds of groups doing different things; from group support for members of their community, you know counselling, drop-in groups, youth groups, youth work. You know, there’s already a lot of initiatives. So yeah I think they’re absolutely key to it [the Big Society]. It would be very much part of their ethos, in any event I think, would be about engaging in that sort of voluntary work.” (Local authority employee)

“There is no Big Society if you don’t include the faith groups and other minorities as well, be it race, or faith or gender, whatever you know. It’s only through reaching those groups that you’ll be able to deliver.” (Local authority officer)

However, concern was expressed by several interviewees that the potential role of the faith sector in the Big Society is not fully understood or appreciated at the national level and within some councils across the country. One Christian faith representative commented that, whilst some Ministers have claimed faith is central to the Big Society, the word ‘faith’ appears to have dropped...
out of policy documentation of the Office for Civil Society. That is, the voluntary, community and faith sector (VCFS) has become the voluntary and community sector. Other interviewees (national policy maker and freelance consultant) also commented that, whilst the Coalition Government has made some positive noises about faith communities, this has not been translated into a clear strategy, policy and/or programme very successfully and there is a great deal of uncertainty. Whilst the Near Neighbours programme has been announced, the level of funding (at £5 million over three years) and eligible targeted areas (ie North West mill towns, Leicester, London and Birmingham) is so far significantly lower than similar funds (such as the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund at £12 million) which were put in place under the New Labour Government. While the Near Neighbours fund is welcomed, interviewees also raised concerns over perceptions of privilege arising from the fact that it is administered through a single (Church of England) faith organisation and parishes rather than through an inter-faith body or the Community Development Foundation. At least two interviewees also felt that the current Coalition Government policy around faith and integration so far comes across as patronising and naive and does not appear to make any reference or be learning key lessons from past work. As one member of a FBO elaborated in relation to the Near Neighbours programme:

“It talks about Mr and Mrs Smith getting to talk to Mr and Mrs Patel down the road and that is the aim of this integration program. It is almost as if there has been no work done on integration and cohesion in the last twenty years and we are starting from scratch. It doesn’t reference any of that. It doesn’t use any of that and it assumes that the Church of England can do it all and it is all going to be done through the Church of England…I think the Ministers in DCLG either don’t know or don’t value any of the work that has been done previously.”

Effective partnership working between councils and with the VCS and faith sector is also considered to be “patchy” and in need of improvement (member of a FBO). Together, this suggests that a better understanding of the VCS and faith sectors and a clear sense of who is doing what within a given locality is fundamentally important in order to best enable councils to facilitate and support such work and avoid duplication (see also section eight on mapping). As one local authority officer explained:

“A lot of those [VCS and faith based] services we may not be aware of. They just happen because they’ve always kind of done it... But I think what we have is an obligation and an opportunity to try and understand that and... why it works, and actually try and sort of do more of it where it’s needed really. That’s the key isn’t it? It’s the support of a leader really, in a kind of, a leadership sort of capacity to support agencies to continue that good work.”

It also suggests that skills development and training may be needed (see section eight). In advising faith groups about how to respond to the lack of clarity about their role, a national policy maker suggested that faith organisations seek to shape the Big Society locally around the activities they are engaged in. This is particularly important if, as one interviewee (a freelance consultant working on faith and VCS) suggests, the delivery of the Big Society is to be determined primarily at the local level.
Other fears and anxieties associated with the Big Society relate to uncertainties around public sector funding and the implications of funding cuts. As one member of a FBO said “I think the Big Society as an idea is probably quite a good idea, but the trouble is it’s also tied at the moment with the cuts which we’re told are necessary”. A number of interviewees stressed that the Big Society idea needs to be backed by better understanding, funding, support and resources. The following quotes illustrate this:

“[the VCS and faith sectors] have got to have the resources, they’ve got to have that ability and they’ve got to have a stable environment within which to operate; because one thing that the communities...are really fed up of is doing something that is just starting to work and then some government comes along and, and cuts the programme. And these things do take money, volunteers aren’t free.” (Member of a faith based organisation, Christian)

“I don’t think they [faith communities] should play the Big Society role...it’s whether they’ve got the capacity; because nobody could do anything for free for an unlimited period of time and I think that’s what the government are expecting. (Local councillor, Muslim)

“I don’t really think that the Government we have at the moment, except for a very few exceptions, really understands the VCS and the way it operates. They just see the word voluntary and volunteers and they think they can deliver many of these services using these volunteers, and they just can’t...I think they think volunteers do things for free. And in a sense they do. But they need organising, they need training, they need support and they have under estimated all that. They also think that social enterprise can solve many of the problems...and some of it can but most of it can't because the people that you are serving don’t have any money. So how can they pay for the services. There is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of it really.” (Member of a faith based organisation)

The Big Society concept, combined with public sector cuts, has led to claims that it is ‘about better services with less money’, ‘doing it on the cheap’ or ‘for nothing’, and that the VCS and faith sector are ‘soft targets’ and are being expected to act a substitute and step in where there are public service cuts. As one member of a FBO commented:

“The key aspect of the Big Society is that it is a way of Government trying to save money and still give us the public services. I think however much they try to hide it or however much the rhetoric they come out with is...that is the underlying theme.”

Several other concerns and/or criticisms were also raised in relation to the Big Society, including:

- funding cuts and a move away from small grants to commissioning and bidding for larger service delivery contracts favours larger and more professional voluntary organisations and disadvantages and/or threatens the existence of smaller community sector organisations providing valuable activities/services
- faith groups may lack capacity and resources to respond to increased needs and service gaps
- more needs to be done to reduce barriers to engagement, including reducing and/
or simplifying bureaucracy (eg recording, monitoring, reporting back and audit trails) and problems of expensive insurance

• there is a risk of losing a degree of professionalism, rigour or expertise that can be expected when services are paid for as opposed to being provided through voluntary effort

• the Big Society seems to be a ‘middle class’ concept to the extent that they are more likely to be able to engage with it, whereas less-well off and vulnerable people and localities lack the necessary skills, resources, confidence and self-esteem

• councils have to act too quickly and speed is not usually compatible with good practice and effective partnership working

• reductions in staff and resources may limit and/or threaten the extent to which officers and councillors develop and maintain contacts with faith and belief communities – yet this is important for delivering the Big Society.

A number of strategies were suggested for addressing some of the challenges. Greater collaboration and partnership working within the faith sector and between it and the VCS and public sector was frequently cited. For example, smaller community organisations could seek to work together to help build and develop capacity to bid for larger contracts and/or VCS organisations could share resources eg human resource and payroll systems. The potential for councils to help facilitate and encourage greater collaboration was identified. This might involve, for example, organising or supporting participatory events bringing VCS and faith based organisations together, and/or encouraging and supporting inter-faith networks and collaboration. Particular training and/or support might be needed to assist organisations that are unfamiliar or struggle with partnership working with other organisations eg how to negotiate and build trust with partners. Early and open communication and dialogue around funding cuts and the Big Society concept, despite its lack of clarity, is also regarded as good practice. The three Big Society community conversations in Pendle (see box one), for example, were seen to have:

“Got people going off and talking about social enterprises and localism and what does that look like. So you can start the ball rolling even before you really know what the big society is about, you know, and I don’t think even now people are totally clear about it... Other councils apparently don’t want to talk about it because there’s nothing definite, you know, and I don’t think you can wait until there’s something definite, that’s too late almost, you know. So we’re talking about it, we’re preparing for it.” (Council officer)

Other strategies suggested and/or adopted by councils include signposting VCS and FBOs to other sources of funding and actively supporting them to strengthen funding applications, for example, through coaching and demystifying what funders are looking for and helping to demonstrate project outcomes already achieved. As for FBOs, one interviewee stressed a need to ensure that their engagement with councils is in line with their vision, mission and values.
8. Bringing it all together: effective partnership working

This section explores cross cutting themes and highlights key factors, methods and approaches to successful partnership working between councils and faith or belief groups.

Building relationships and trust

Relationships and trust clearly lie at the heart of effective partnership working. As noted above, statutory authorities can sometimes find it difficult to approach a faith or cultural group, particularly if they don’t know any of its members, and may initially face mistrust or suspicion. There may also be language and cultural barriers. According to one officer, councils sometimes appear “quite threatening and it is up to us to break down those barriers”. Interviewees were asked what strategies worked well in building relationships and trust with faith and belief groups. In relation to making initial contact, having a good understanding of the communities and groups within a locality (see mapping and literacy below), attending faith and community events, and identifying influential people within them are considered important. As one local authority interviewee commented, it’s about:

“Getting out there to see what’s going on, and knowing what’s going on, and which groups are out there...It’s not just finding the right people. It’s recognising when you can influence and how to influence selective members, and other senior officers to get buy-in into different ways of working and initiatives. It is, it’s communication, talking and being out there, going out there into the community and also finding out who the influential figures are in each community. But then you have got to make sure that there are not other groups that are less powerful in that community that are being excluded. So really it is just knowing your community.”

Seeking the help of existing or new contacts that are trusted by faith or humanist groups, eg a colleague, a faith or humanist representative or community leader, with a view to facilitating access and introductions to their networks can be useful. As one local authority officer suggested, “the thing to do is to find someone who already is doing that and get yourself invited into their world”. Such people can help ‘champion’ working between the local authority and faith or belief groups (see also below). Examples were also given where officers and/or councillors with a faith have been able to broker conversations based on their understanding of both the faith group and local authority concerned. For example:

“The council had no interaction with them [the mosques], no council officials, had been into the Mosques so I’ve helped to open those doors and we meet every quarter now... I think generally it helps because I myself am Muslim and the people of the faith community can interact with me knowing I understand the faith and obviously I can...”
sit on the other side of the fence as my background is in local government (Local councillor)

“The language between the two [Church and local authority] is very different you know... I think having people who can speak both languages, both the sort of the State language and the faith group language is hugely valuable for just brokering those conversations... Being part of both worlds helps. I do see my role here as being of value to both communities; bridging to a certain extent. Helping each other understand each other.” (Local authority officer)

According to this interviewee, ‘being part of both worlds’ helped them establish a credibility and authenticity and enabled them to speak in an appropriate language which, in turn, helped communicate the value of working together. In the words of the interviewee:

“I guess it wasn’t just the Local Authority coming and saying you know we want you to do this stuff...I was able to show that there was value in it for the Church and for its members and for the people it was trying to help, rather than just them being asked to do something” (Local authority officer)

Similarly a local councillor of Muslim faith stated in relation to brokering conversations:

“The benefit that I had was that the Mosque Imams will trust me. Primarily as a Muslim and then as a councillor. And obviously because... I’ve been on the council for a few years, the council, fellow councillors and the chief executive... knew that they also could trust me because I understood their way of thinking. I understood the Imams’ way of thinking and the first couple of meetings had me hand holding both sides of the room together.” (Local councillor)

Going out and meeting people on their own ‘turf’ and attending events was also found to be effective, although it was recognised that this takes time and resources. As one local authority officer suggested when building relationships:

“I think it’s really going out and making an effort and going out to the communities and getting to meet them on their own kind of patch and seeing how you can work with what existing structures there are... I think the notion that you invite them all here [to the local authority], you know, to do some work... is not realistic. So it has to be a very slow process of just building; trying to build relationships.”

Similarly:

“In terms of [officers and councillors] being in touch with your community, it [attending events] has a massive effect on that relationship and trust aspect; people can praise you, people can criticize you and you’re taking on that feedback and you’re bringing it back in; and I’d say that is a plus for [name of area] in terms of my experience of other authorities”. (Muslim faith representative)

One elected member also suggested first starting relationship building with faith groups that are more outward looking and that are more likely to be comfortable with engaging with statutory partners. The interviewee explained that:

“Some Muslims are much more liberal than others and some Jews are much more liberal than others, some Christians are, and I think...
Faith and belief in partnership

we need to start with the liberal [groups] before we go in much further. Because certainly the...really Orthodox Jews...they are very orthodox. They wouldn’t come to our meetings, they wouldn’t eat off our plates or drink our drink or eat our food. So in a similar way we would have to go very gently with them. But you start with what you’ve got and you make what you’ve got feel comfortable with each other, because until you’ve done that you’re not going to get much further.”

Moving beyond initial contact and building deeper relationships is often helped by undertaking joint work of some form, particularly where this involves funding and/or other support, as the following quote illustrates:

“What is useful is having their faith representative on the partnership board, because then we can really, really start planning together more...because again you’ve got the relationship. But the beginning of the win/win situation is quite often funding or benefits such as training, CRB checks. But funding for projects is the best way, especially if there is a project that can show that there are more benefits in working together.” (Local authority officer)

Other strategies and factors of significance in building trust and relationships include ensuring staff involved in engagement have, or can develop, relevant skills, values and capabilities. These include:

- good active listening and people skills
- open, respectful and assertive communication
- acknowledging the views of others
- values of honesty and transparency
- knowledgeable about different faiths and cultures
- having a passion for making a difference and
- being able to identify and communicate benefits to others of joint working

The importance of having a dedicated post or person responsible with time, capacity and resources for building relations with faith and belief groups was also considered important (see below), as was continuing to build contacts and relationships beyond the ‘usual suspects’. Local authority staffing and funding cuts, however, are seen as a threat to this capacity, and to some of the networks and collaborative activities that have been undertaken.

The role of local authority leaders, councillors and officers

Strong leadership and the presence of councillors from a faith background and/or ‘champions’ (officers or councillors) with an understanding and focus on engaging and building relations with faith and belief groups were cited as being important for:

- Facilitating a culture and context that values and engages with faith and belief.
- Addressing anxiety and fears around engaging with faith and belief groups, both internal to councils and externally. This involved open communication, transparency, myth busting and, in some cases, conflict management.
- Building good relationships, developing networks and facilitating collaborative action with faith and belief groups to meet local authority and faith/belief group aims.
• Brokering conversations between councils and faith and belief groups.
• Celebrating and communicating success.

The following quotes help illustrate this:

“If elected members didn’t think it [faith] was important or were ignorant or not concerned about it or embarrassed about it, then I think it’s far harder for everyone to actually make progress” (Local authority officer)

“Having a charismatic Mayor helps, and she always attends [events], as much as she can” (Local authority officer)

In relation to councillors, interviewees identified a number of roles in relation to faith and belief, including:

• informing others of, and/or campaigning on behalf of faith, belief and cultural needs and interests eg campaigning for a prayer room to be available in a new school
• helping faith and belief groups resolve issues
• acting as a mediator between groups and helping to resolve tensions
• brokering conversations between the local authority and faith and belief groups.

Establishing an early dialogue with faith and belief groups is seen to help councillors fulfil these roles. Several benefits to local councillors were identified, including gaining access to a bigger audience (eg worshiping communities), being better informed about community issues and enhancing their profile and/or canvassing. Even so, some interviewees reported that some councillors do not engage with faith groups specifically or said that this could be improved. Barriers included:

• a feeling that dialogue with faith communities is not a legitimate part of their role
• lack of knowledge and confidence to engage, both by councillors and faith groups (see also below on literacy)
• anxieties around saying or doing the ‘wrong thing’ and offending people
• cultural barriers and/or mistrust by certain groups towards the state
• having a faith of their own, which might act as a barrier to open dialogue or engagement with some groups of their own or other faiths.

Possible solutions suggested included: induction training on faith and belief for new councillors, dedicated officer support on faith and belief related issues, and educating less well established communities (of faith or otherwise) of the role of councillors, MPs and the council (see also section on literacy and training below). According to the LGA survey (2008, p8), those authorities with an officer or councillor with lead responsibility for faith issues were significantly more engaged with local inter-faith activity eg in terms of funding, being involved and consulting.

Infrastructure and capacity

So far the importance of effective relationship building, trust and leadership has been highlighted as important for successful partnership working. Resources and capacity are also clearly significant in enabling both councils and faith and humanist groups to create and respond to opportunities to build relations and work together. Previous research (Fentener et al, 2008, p37) suggests that limited capacity and resources among the faith sector is one of the biggest
Faith and belief in partnership. The LGA survey (2008) also reported a lack of funding for councils to be able to resource inter-faith work. The impact of limited and/or reduced resources has already been discussed in relation to the Big Society and funding in sections six and seven.

Also of importance is support infrastructure (see appendix one re different types of faith and humanist infrastructure). Over the last two decades or so, there has been a significant increase in the number of inter-faith organisations at the local, regional and national levels, some of which have received public sector funding and support. At the local level, councils have been involved in setting up and supporting some of these. For example, the LGA survey (2008) found that 55 per cent of authorities reported they had been involved in setting up the local inter-faith organisation, with 83 per cent being involved with it following this. Councils may also engage with other single faith based or humanist networks and organisations. This infrastructure has facilitated effective local authority engagement with faith and humanist groups in the following ways:

- offering a source of representation, engagement and accountability
- helping faith communities to speak with a stronger, more coordinated and legitimate voice
- helping faith communities to come together and be clearer about what their needs are and how they can help statutory partners and others
- providing a forum for deliberation, trust and relationship building and joint social action between faith, and in some cases, humanist groups

- supporting tailored support and guidance to faith based community organisations undertaking public service delivery and social action eg via regional and local inter-faith forums.

Leicester is identified as having a strong infrastructure, which is seen as important in building successful engagement (see box nine below).

**Box 9: Case study of faith based infrastructure in Leicester**

**Faith based infrastructure in Leicester**

There are various networks and organisations in Leicester, which together form the basis for collaboration between faith groups and statutory partners. These include:

- A Faith Leaders Forum consisting of high profile faith leaders from different religions. The Forum was set up and is led by the Bishop. One of its strengths is an ability and willingness to respond quickly to challenges eg acting together to send out messages to communities relating to local English Defence League protests against Islamic extremism.

- Leicester Council of Faiths consisting of representatives from different faiths. This seeks to promote trust, peace, understanding and cooperation among the city’s faith communities, and liaises with statutory partners in order to provide information and give a voice to faith communities. Some of its members have been serving on the LSP as faith representatives, and the Council of Faiths has received grant funding from the local authority to support its activities.

- St Philips Centre: a Christian led multi-faith centre that seeks to build cohesion
Faith and belief in partnership and facilitate better understanding and confidence towards a multi-faith world. In doing so, it provides training to individuals and public, private and voluntary sector organisations, supports dialogue groups and events, such as inter faith football and cricket matches. The St Philips Centre has been involved in undertaking PVE work and is involved in delivering the Church Urban Fund’s Near Neighbors programme that is supported by Government.

- A variety of other single and inter-faith groups exist supporting dialogue and engagement, including: dialogue groups such as the Muslim-Christian women’s group and Muslim-Hindu group; the Federation of Muslim Organisations, which is an umbrella organisation with 94 affiliated mosques that has worked closely with the police on security matters (see Lowndes and Chapman, 2005); and the Interfaith Forum for Leicestershire, which supports faith communities to develop, build social capital and facilitate better relations with each other and the wider Leicestershire community.

The nature and level of infrastructure varies greatly in terms of locality and within and between faith and belief groups. As Lowndes and Chapman (2005) suggest, resource differences can be particularly marked between Christian and non-Christian faiths; and can depend on the size and length of time a faith community has been established in an area. Non-Christian and smaller faith and/or belief groups can find it harder to engage in partnerships, consultations and other activities eg commissioning, especially where heavy reliance is placed on a few volunteers with the time, knowledge and skills to engage. Having said this, some interviewees also highlighted a decreasing capacity of Christian churches to engage due to falling membership and donations.

“If you take my church...the congregation isn’t that large. There isn’t an awful lot of spare resource. People aren’t just sitting back and doing nothing, they’re pretty well stretched doing what they do, you know.” (Local councillor)

Greater collaborative working between Churches was suggested as a potential way forward:

“I do think if the churches combined more, between them they could manage it, and then they would have a big role to play in the Big Society. But I wouldn’t want them to be them or synagogues or mosques or temples or gurdwaras, I wouldn’t want them to be substitutes for what the State ought to be providing. I don’t want the state or the council anywhere to think ‘oh, that’s all right, we don’t have to worry about that, tick that off, that’s been done’” (Local councillor)

For some interviewees a key concern relates to the lack of acknowledgement, understanding and support by the Coalition Government for faith and wider VCS infrastructure. According to at least two interviewees, the Coalition Government so far appears sceptical about investing in faith and wider VCS infrastructure, and seems to have made little attempt to reflect in policy terms on its role and value. This, in part, is reflected in the non-continuation of funding, for example, of Regional Faith Forums which have played a key role in supporting faith based social action. Funding cuts have meant some regional and local inter-faith forums have either ceased functioning or have scaled back their activities. It is felt that, whilst some inter-faith activity and dialogue
may continue, this will result in a loss of expertise, training, guidance, networking and support in helping faith communities to undertake social action and work effectively in partnership with councils and other statutory partners.

Interviewees also commented that smaller local community organisations, together with newer less established faith communities with fewer resources and immature networks, are most likely to suffer from this loss of support.

The fact that faith groups will have less opportunity to come together may also mean that there is a loss of mutual understanding and support which comes about through dialogue. The loss of the regional tier, together with the Coalition Government’s focus on localism, suggests that it will be up to councils and local faith forums and belief groups to develop effective relationships and collaborative working. Some councils are further ahead with this than others.

Mapping communities and data collection

As seen above, there are clear arguments for a good knowledge of the presence and activities of local VCS groups (including faith-based and secular groups), particularly in responding to the Big Society and localism agendas. As one officer commented:

“I think we’ve not done enough in really understanding exactly what’s there, what impact is it having and how we can, you know, strengthen that...because a lot of those services [provided by faith and VCS groups] we may not be aware of, they just happen because they’ve always kind of done it. Because in a sense that’s what the Big Society is all about.”

The same interviewee went on to argue that the local authority has an obligation to find out more of what is going on as part of its role as a community leader, with a view to supporting agencies to continue “good work” and avoiding duplication, particularly in the context of austerity measures.

Mapping faith activity and organisations provides one means of gaining this knowledge. Survey research indicates that around 24 per cent of councils had some kind of printed or web-based directory of places of worship and or faith groups/organisations (LGA, 2008).

Of these, many were produced by councils (49 per cent), other agencies eg county council or universities (42 per cent), or faith forums (9 per cent). Some of the benefits of undertaking mapping activity can be seen in box 10 below.

Box 10: Case study of faithbook in Barnet

Faithbook in Barnet

Faithbook is a directory of faith based youth work and activity across Barnet, some of which is run specifically for followers of a religion and others which are open to those of any or no faith. It was developed by Barnet Council for Voluntary Youth Service (BYCAS), which is a VCS umbrella organisation offering support, training, information and advice to VCS organisations running activities for 11-19 year olds in Barnet. The directory is available in book and web form and is the result of mapping work undertaken by a researcher appointed to project manage the work. The project
received some funding from Connexions\textsuperscript{28} and began by creating a database of Churches, who were then contacted to find out about their activities. Prior to this, there was no comprehensive list of Churches in the borough. The project was later expanded to cover other faiths. The directory is kept up to date through contact with faith and youth leaders. Key benefits and outputs of the project include:

- a better evidence base on the availability and geographical spread of youth activities, which when analysed alongside ward demographic profiles, enabled gaps in statutory and faith-based provision to be identified and addressed
- encouraging faith-based organisations to provide outreach youth work in areas of need and facilitating the development of support networks between organisations
- the opportunity to inform organisations of funding opportunities, policies, training (eg around safeguarding children) and support
- providing a source of information for people for whom faith-based provision might be important, to access youth services.

For more information about Faithbook, please visit: www.thefaithbook.co.uk

Data on religion or belief is also collected by councils as part of standard equalities questions, for example, in surveys. In this study, some interviewees were not aware of mapping in their local authority and identified limitations in the availability of data around faith or belief. One local councillor suggested that a better understanding of the faith make-up of their ward, including different traditions within faiths, would be useful. Several interviewees raised problems in collecting data around faith, due to sensitivities and anxieties around declaring religious affiliation or lack of confidence in asking about it. Faith or belief is seen by some to be a ‘private thing’, although similar problems were also identified in the past in relation to ethnicity. Ensuring people involved in collecting data are trained, well informed and can explain the rationale for its collection helped address this. The use of ‘quick cards’ were also found to be useful in communicating explanations. In addition, proxy data (eg origin or ethnicity) has been used as a basis for estimating faith affiliation. Some councils have also benefited from acquiring data on community organisations from VCS umbrella organisations, although this can sometimes be difficult to get hold of\textsuperscript{29}.

Literacy and training

Despite being widely recognised as a challenge (see for example, Fentener et al 2008; Duncan and Madeiros, 2007), a lack of faith literacy and awareness or understanding of the work and motivations of FBOs still remains, as the following quotes illustrate:

“There is a definite lack of what I would describe as religious literacy out there, that they don’t understand what religion is about, full stop. Forget the denominations, forget the different faiths, forget all of that. What’s this game about? ...Now years and years

\textsuperscript{28} Connexions is an initiative aimed at providing information, advice and guidance to young people

and years ago, it was accepted that people would understand what religion was about. What churches were there for, and all the rest of it. But now there’s that sort of lack, and I think that is one of the bigger barriers.” (Faith representative, Christian)

“I would say that the challenges in that respect have more been out of ignorance rather than anything constructive; so ignorance has to, well exactly what do you do? What’s the difference?” (Member of a Faith Based Organisation, Muslim)

“Councils frequently don’t have the staff or the members who have an ability to work with the voluntary community sector, don’t understand it let alone with the faith part of that sector. So they, they haven’t got the staff… and the skills and abilities. The other thing is when they do get staff with skills and abilities they tend to move on and they don’t necessarily leave the legacy behind ‘cos they don’t build up the skills for other people in there.” (Member of a Faith Based Organisation, Christian)

Fentener et al (2008, p43-44) found that this lack of understanding was seen as problematic to government-faith sector relationships by 30 per cent of survey respondents. They also highlight difficulties in the ability of statutory bodies to distinguish between religious and community aspects of faith organisations work, which posed difficulties for faith groups applying for funding or seeking to get involved in consultations and public service delivery.

Specific training for staff and elected members on working with faith groups and inter-faith organisations has in some cases been provided. This is not the case in all councils, some of which, being wary of singling out faith groups as somehow different, cover aspects of faith or belief literacy under equalities and diversity training. Even so, several interviewees expressed a need for more training (see, for example, above in relation to councillors), though felt that local authority cut backs may mean there is less time, resource and funding to support this. Where this is the case, it may help to ensure that there are officers and/or councillors with a faith and belief remit who can act as a broker, build networks and offer support and advice. Baker (2009, p120) also suggests faith literacy should move beyond just functionalist levels of discourse, around ‘what to do at a civic function’, to one that helps uncover and explores common values and visions, as well as differences in language. A case can also be made for greater understanding of secular and humanist groups, and a deeper examination of the potential contribution they can make to policy development and delivery.

Equally, a need for greater understanding and training of how local government works among faith and humanist groups was also identified by interviewees:

“I think, you know, the whole idea of religious literacy, which I think is a much flaunted idea, is a two way process. I mean I think it is a reasonable criticism by policy makers in government that religious people ought to learn their world as well... It is a bit of an arrogant position that faith communities say you’ve got to listen to us, but actually we don’t learn the language that that needs to be expressed in. And I think what you really need is a dialogue, and you need translators who can translate the language of both bodies because both of them have quite interesting dialogue going on within themselves.” (Faith representative, Christian)
“[You need to] be aware of the changes, understand how local government works. Understand the difference between local government and the whole of the sector and the controls and procedures and also the bureaucratic process. Once you understand that you are not going to get frustrated. You are not going to get angry. You understand the system and work with the system because you are trying to get the same finish line, but you all have different means of getting there.” (Faith representative, Muslim)

According to Fentener et al (2008, p38) greater literacy for faith groups should include knowing which government departments are relevant to their work, awareness around policies and agendas, and government funding, support and consultation opportunities. Together, this suggests that secular agencies and partners need to be open to learning and understanding distinctive faith-based and secular group organisational needs, interests, visions, language and ways of operating, and FBOs and humanist groups should become better at articulating ‘what they are about, who they are, what they stand for and how they behave’ (member of a Christian faith-based charity)30.

Collaboration between FBOs and the wider VCS

Collaboration between FBOs and the wider VCS can take many forms, including: dialogue and joint social action; work on LSP and Council run equalities boards or sub-groups; and the sharing and exchange of information, support and resources. Joint social action has, for example, taken place on topics such as asylum seekers and refugees and global citizenship. Many FBOs are members of, and can access information and support from local VCS umbrella groups, who often view FBOs as a sub-set of the wider VCS (see Cradock et al, 2005).

In addition, one local VCS umbrella organisation has been contracted by the local authority to support faith, and other communities of interest representatives on an LSP. Some local VCS umbrella groups have also commissioned work relating to faith communities, as can be seen in box 11 below. Barnet’s Faithbook is another example of where an umbrella VCS organisation has worked with FBOs, this time to establish a database on faith based provision of youth activities, which in turn has provided further opportunities for the development of support networks and collaborative social action (see box 10 above). One interviewee from a Christian FBO also reported working collaboratively with a humanist organisation.

Box 11: Case study of CommUNITY Barnet

CommUNITY Barnet

CommUNITY Barnet is a voluntary umbrella organisation that supports, and works to promote the VCS in the borough. It is part of the national network of Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS). It receives funding from the local authority, alongside other partners, and has a membership of around 260 VCS organisations. These represent all aspects of the VCS, including faith and wider VCS groups. CommUNITY Barnet has commissioned a consultant to work with

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30 See ‘Volunteering and Faith Communities in England’ (Boeck et al, 2009) for a more detailed and general review of volunteering and social action by FBOs, including information on: types of activity; motivations; networking and partnership activities; support needs; and cohesion.
different faith and community groups to raise awareness of safeguarding issues relating to children. This involves reviewing customs and practices and increasing awareness of, and access to, resources, as well as working with faith leaders around issues associated with inter-generational and cultural tensions, ‘spirit possession’, and witchcraft etc. The project also seeks to enhance knowledge and skills of professionals working in the field to understand and engage better with families from different faith and cultural backgrounds. As part of this, support is provided by a local safeguarding advisor, who has been running events on safeguarding at faith based schools and places of worship31.

For more information about CommUNITY Barnet, please visit: www.communitybarnet.org.uk

Boeck et al (2009) suggest that there was a greater tendency for links to wider VCS organisations to be formed by larger and more established FBOs, with smaller FBOs tending to rely on their own networks. Several interviewees also noted that more could be done to encourage better links (see also Boeck et al, 2009, p48; NCVO, 2007, p41; Lukka et al, 2003, p71). As one interviewee from a Christian faith based organisation stated: “we’ve all got something to say, and learn from one another”. The similarity of many faith-based and wider VCS organisational aims and needs is also a reason for greater links, particularly in the context of the Big Society agenda, more limited resources and the winding up of some regional inter-faith forums, which provided support to FBOs.

Barriers to greater collaboration identified include FBOs not seeing themselves as part of the wider VCS, together with lack of awareness of the existence or relevance of Councils for Voluntary Services. As one interviewee suggested:

“People in FBOs delivering social action on the whole don’t see themselves as part of a wider VCS. They very urgently need to be able to do that. We’re always pointing [FBOs] to other resources in the wider VCS... [and to] doing things in partnerships with the wider VCS; trying to get faith groups to see that they can access these resources and that they are part of this wider grouping. They’d be more powerful if they are. And some get it, increasingly they get it” (Member of a FBO)

A number of interviewees reported that, in some cases, the secular VCS did not understand or know how best to engage FBOs, as the following quote suggests:

“Many community sector organisations don’t understand how to engage faith groups and they’ll say ‘oh we put this thing on and we invite everybody’; but they don’t come, which is a classic reason for not involving people... It's an excuse, it's not a reason. And you have to find ways round that... they haven’t bothered to learn about the people who they’re inviting.” (Member of a FBO)

Another interviewee from a Christian FBO highlighted anxieties and misconceptions around proselytisation as a barrier:

“Again we run up against the problem of: ‘Are you proselytising?’ That’s always the big issue... But we try to work as closely as we can with all the organisations in town... And so bereavement counselling groups,

31 CommUNITY Barnet also provide advice, workshops, resources and a toolkit to help support VCS organisations undertake collaborative activities. See http://tinyurl.com/37d276c
Citizen’s Advice Bureau, all those places. We try to relate to them. It’s up to them whether they use us, really. Some of them don’t… [and]… some of them do, because they see, actually, what we’ve got to offer as a spiritual dimension, they can’t offer within their remit.”

Similar problems have been highlighted by research by Boeck et al (2009, p10) who suggest “there is a widespread view that secular organisations, including voluntary infrastructure bodies, do not yet fully understand what is distinctive about faith-based volunteering groups, and as a result do not engage with them as effectively as they could”. They went on to point out that secular principles and bureaucratic structures might also act as a barrier. This suggests more needs to be done to facilitate better faith-secular VCS links and to provide ‘faith aware’ support to faith based organisations, for example, through local faith based forums or Council of Voluntary Services. This is particularly important in light of the closure and scaling back of activities of some regional faith forums.

Interviewees identified a number of ways to encourage greater collaborative working. The first entails more opportunities for faith and secular VCS organisations to come together and understand each other, which both councils and umbrella VCS organisations could potentially facilitate. Secondly, FBOs need to be encouraged to attend such events. As one interviewee from a Christian FBO commented:

“We’ve certainly been involved in things and attended things… because there’s been an interest. And that’s helped to break down barriers and show people, ‘actually we’re not just about proselytising, but we are about caring and moving it out and working it out.’ But it takes a bit longer to work that through.

…So activities that mean faith groups and non-faith groups could come together to discuss and talk about how they can serve the community together, would be useful. There’s not enough of them… And I think under the Big Society idea, it’s going to have to be looked at in a bigger way.”

Third, and perhaps of relevance to the last suggestion, a clear rationale for greater collaboration needs to be communicated and success demonstrated, as illustrated by the following quote:

“You have to give people a reason why they should [collaborate]. You have to give people some direct benefits of doing that… What we find with the safeguarding side of things is that we can process CRB checks at a subsidised rate and that can bring people in. You know, and then you can start to have conversations with them about other things; so what is to be gained from being part of a network or from working in a partnership that you couldn’t do on your own.” (Freelance project manager)

Fourth, one faith representative advised that potential FBO and secular VCS partners focus on the practical community based elements of FBOs’ work, on the basis that:

“Whatever’s driving the person sat next to me to try to answer that particular need, doesn’t matter. I know what’s driving me to try and answer that need… You get convergences, and if you can get the convergences right, then you’ll get the movement that you’re looking for. And so you get, ‘let’s sit down, let’s talk about it, we’ve got a problem, let’s solve the problem. Let’s make it a better place to live in. Let’s make it a better place to be. Let’s protect the children better.’ We’ve all got the same aim. And that’s the type of thing that works”. (Faith representative, Christian)
9. Conclusion

This report has presented various opportunities, challenges and barriers surrounding partnership and collaboration between councils and faith or belief groups, together with strategies and methods for addressing these and creating better working relations. In doing so, it offers scope for greater understanding and learning across councils and their partners. Key benefits and opportunities surrounding the engagement of faith and belief groups relate, in part, to their values and ethos, expertise and knowledge of local areas, capacity to mobilise volunteers and collective action, role in providing culturally sensitive and targeted services, ability to ‘do more with less’, and potential to act as a critical friend to statutory partners and policy-makers (see also table two below for a summary of benefits).

Many of these benefits form a key rationale for an increased emphasis on faith and belief in policy discourse from the 1990s, particularly those relating to expertise and resources in better meeting policy objectives (see Dinham and Lowndes, 2008). Subsequently greater opportunities have arisen for the engagement of faith groups in policy-making and delivery eg through representation on LSPs and equalities boards, and funding for social action and cohesion. Religion and belief has also increasingly become an explicit dimension in work and activities around equalities, safeguarding of children and other services, including support services provided by VCS umbrella groups.

There was concern among some interviewees that the Coalition Government had, at the time of interviewing (ie between 2010 and mid 2011), placed too little emphasis on the role of the faith sector in policy discourse and that there seemed to be less understanding of the faith sector at the political level. Since then, the potential of faith groups to contribute to the Government’s integration and localism agendas has been outlined in its ‘Creating the Conditions for Integration’ strategy (see DCLG, 2012), as well as several Ministerial speeches. These indicate that the Government wants to encourage interfaith and collaborative social action projects, and is supporting this through the Church Urban Fund’s Near Neighbours programme (which has £5 million funding from DCLG). The Government’s integration strategy also highlights its support of the national Faith based Regeneration Network and Inter Faith Network for the UK in helping to link and strengthen faith-based social action projects and inter faith groups. Faith groups and local authority interviewees themselves confirm that faith groups have a potential role to play in undertaking social action, integration and promoting a stronger sense of civic responsibility and active citizenship, and argue that it is what the faith, and wider VCS, have been doing for years. However, there has been much concern and anxiety about responding to these agendas and local needs by both statutory partners and FBOs, particularly in relation to the speed of policy...
change and the implications of funding, income (eg through falling donations) and staffing cuts. It is also felt that the cost of undertaking voluntary work is not fully appreciated or recognised by the current Government.

Several strategies are being adopted in negotiating and adapting to this, including holding local events to open up dialogue and thinking around the changes, and to identify ways forward, celebrate success and facilitate shared learning and collaboration. There are also reports that the extent and willingness to engage these groups varies significantly across councils. In some councils there is resistance to engaging (through funding, involvement or consultations), perhaps due to lack of awareness or fears and anxieties around proselytisation and equalities issues. This report also highlighted several other challenges and/or questions raised in relation to the engagement of faith or belief groups, together with strategies and methods in which these are being addressed (see table two and appendix two for a list of these).

Many of the opportunities and challenges, and in some cases, strategies for addressing them are similar to those for the wider VCS. Indeed, many see the community and social action based activities of FBOs as a sub-set of the VCS. Similarities include: tendencies toward a value-driven motivation based on values such as justice, equity and solidarity; the types and uneven distribution of resources; and involvement in activities such as social action, service delivery, fundraising, consultations, partnership working and campaigning. Both groups also face similar challenges and tensions that can, in some cases, hinder their ability to engage. These include value or mission drift, limited and uneven capacity and challenges associated with acting as a representative on partnership bodies. These similarities suggest there is significant potential for faith-based and secular VCS organisations to support and learn valuable lessons from one another.

Even so, there is scope for faith groups to offer distinctive opportunities and face distinctive challenges associated with their spiritual or religious connection. Some, although not all, FBOs may for example have a distinctive role in addressing spiritual, religious or other needs and in representing or engaging people with an active faith identity or people who would not trust or approach other organisations. A distinctive role is also evident for FBOs in working alongside statutory partners in countering trends towards religious extremism. Distinctive challenges, on the other hand, can be experienced in relation to a lack of understanding of faith group beliefs, motivations and language, funding discrimination and issues surrounding proselytisation and public funding. It is important that these differences are recognised within the policy domain as they have implications for improved engagement with faith groups, together with arguments both for and against their involvement in the public realm.

32 See Chapman (2009) for a more detailed review of similarities and distinctiveness between faith and wider VCS organisations in the context of urban governance.
### Table 2: Engaging faith and belief groups: opportunities, rationales, challenges and methods

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<tr>
<th>Aspect of involvement</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Governance</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Holistic commitments</td>
<td>Physical capital</td>
<td>Widening participation</td>
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<td>Embedded identities</td>
<td>Human capital</td>
<td>Representation</td>
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<td>Reflection of diversity</td>
<td>Social capital</td>
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<td>Responsibility and citizenship</td>
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<td>Re-moralising public life</td>
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<td>Key implications for Motivations</td>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>Partnership and co-production</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution to national and local policy objectives</td>
<td>Active and responsible citizens</td>
<td>Strengthened and empowered communities</td>
<td>Delivering the Big Society and localism</td>
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<td>Empowered citizens</td>
<td>Voluntary action</td>
<td>Integration and cohesion</td>
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<td>Philanthropy</td>
<td>Building social capital</td>
<td>Building a sense of ‘Britishness’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inclusion and equality</td>
<td>Expertise and knowledge</td>
<td>Preventing violent extremism work</td>
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<td>Improved access to communities</td>
<td>Enhanced policy/service responsiveness</td>
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<td>Avoiding duplication</td>
<td>Better meeting needs</td>
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<td>Benefits to faith and belief groups</td>
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<td>Ensuring practical contribution of faith or belief is recognised</td>
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Table 2 continued: Engaging faith and belief groups: opportunities, rationales, challenges and methods

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<tr>
<th>Aspect of involvement</th>
<th>Normative</th>
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<th>Governance</th>
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| Challenges for policy makers and practitioners | Religious and secular group literacy  
Intersection with secularism  
Respecting difference  
Addressing and managing anxieties and conflict  
Establishing common language and understanding  
Mistrust of statutory partners  
Cultural barriers                                                                 | Mapping diverse groups and resources  
Staffing and funding cuts  
Dealing with resource constraints  
Specialist capacity building  
Avoiding privilege and exploitation  
Valuing intangible resources and outcomes  
Getting beyond ‘usual suspects’  
Short-term funding  
Lack of data/information on religion or belief                                                               | Deciding extent and nature of engagement  
Identifying good partners  
Incentivising involvement  
Clarity of roles and responsibilities  
Building trust and good relations  
Assessing representative claims  
Balancing different needs and interests  
Evaluating and monitoring outcomes  
Adapting to change                                                                                     |
| Challenges for faith and belief communities       | Policy and state literacy  
Respecting difference  
Balancing commitments  
Clarifying values and motives  
Responding to anxieties and conflict  
Establishing common language and understanding  
Cultural barriers                                                                                       | Securing funding and other support  
Marketing  
Falling or low membership  
Reduced income from donations  
Lack of capacity eg time, expertise  
Difficulty in getting volunteers  
Short-term funding  
Sustainability and funding dependency                                                                       | Establishing a higher profile and being invited to participate  
Understanding their roles  
Maintaining independence  
Building trust and good relations  
Building a constituency and legitimacy  
Representing diversity  
Supporting representatives  
Adapting to change                                                                                       |
| Challenges for support infrastructure organisations | Religious and secular group literacy  
Respecting difference  
Balancing commitments                                                                                   | Securing funding and other support  
Mapping diverse groups  
Securing membership                                                                                   | Supporting representatives and faith and VCS activity  
Building a constituency and legitimacy  
Maintaining independence  
Adapting to change                                                                                       |

Developed and adapted from Lowndes and Chapman (2007 and 2005)
10. Recommendations

The extent to which benefits of engaging faith and belief groups can be harnessed and challenges overcome will depend on the willingness and efforts of policy-makers, practitioners and faith and belief groups alike. In relation to this, a number of practical and policy recommendations are identified below.

National government and association

- Promote greater clarity around the Big Society and localism agendas, and review and develop informed strategies around the engagement of faith and belief groups in these and other policies (eg integration) at the national and local levels alongside, or as part of wider civil society.
- As part of the above, examine what more can be done to reduce barriers to engagement by faith or belief groups and review the needs and provision of funding, support, infrastructure and resources of the VCS and faith sectors.
- Ensure appropriate lessons are learnt from previous policies and experiences and reflect on the loss of regional and local VCS and faith infrastructure organisations and activities, with a view to finding alternative support mechanisms to enable such groups to better respond to current engagement opportunities.
- Facilitate better understanding of the similarities and distinctiveness in the opportunities and challenges of engaging faith and belief groups among civil servants and politicians at the national and local levels.
- Update guidance to councils to cover effective partnership working with faith or belief groups as it applies to the current economic, political and social context.

Local authorities

- Recognise the similarities and distinctiveness between the potential contribution and challenges facing FBOs and representatives and those from the wider VCS.
- Review and develop informed strategies around the engagement, representation and funding of faith and belief groups alongside, or as part of, the wider VCS and other stakeholders.
- As part of the above, examine what more can be done to reduce barriers to engagement by faith or belief groups and review the provision of any distinctive support, infrastructure and funding needs. This can include non-financial support eg use of buildings and office space, signposting, information exchange, supporting VCS and faith organisations to strengthen funding applications.
- Support the work of inter-faith organisations.
• Ensure any focus on faith in integration and cohesion strategies do not overly heighten a sense of the ‘other’ or send out a message that it is only about race/faith.

• Seek to build relations and trust with faith and belief groups during the ‘good times’ with a view to better responding and overcoming future challenges or tensions.

• Seek to ‘get out’ and meet people on their own ‘turf’, attend faith and community events and identify influential people with a view to helping build trust and relationships.

• Develop opportunities and strategies whereby councils, statutory partners, VCS and faith and belief groups meet each other with a view to building understanding, trust, relationships, sharing information and collaborative working.

• Review and adopt appropriate consultation strategies and methods for engaging with faith and belief groups alongside other stakeholders. This might involve: consulting via inter-faith forums, using a variety of consultation mechanisms, supporting faith and VCS organisations to take a lead role in setting up events and/or consulting more widely within their communities, and providing consultation feedback.

• Take steps to ensure faith and belief groups are aware of available engagement opportunities and can see the benefit of their involvement.

• Ensure faith or belief representatives on governing or partnership bodies are clear about their role and have appropriate guidance, training, support and capacity building to help build confidence.

• Avoid assumptions that a representative represents a whole community or sector and be aware that accountability and wider communication can happen, but tends to be relatively informal and ad-hoc.

• Identify appropriate criteria on which a representative and their claims can be assessed eg a charismatic and powerful figure, well connected to various organisations and networks, relevant expertise and knowledge, etc.

• When making contact with faith groups consider first approaching ‘gate-keepers’, more outward looking FBOs and/or seek the help of a ‘broker’, such as a councillor, officer or community leader from the same faith background, who can help facilitate an introduction, negotiations and relationship building.

• Ensure staff involved in engagement activities have or develop relevant skills and knowledge eg active listening, being able to identify ‘win/win’ outcomes, and being open, respectful and assertive.

• Consider having a dedicated councillor or officer with a remit, time, capacity and resources for building relations with faith and belief groups.

• Take steps to articulate what funding conditions and constraints are and ensure clarity, transparency and agreement over what counts as proselytising and failing to deliver on equalities. Seek to address any misplaced fears or anxieties around these eg through strong leadership, transparency, trust building, ensuring clarity around not funding religious activity, ‘myth busting’ and demonstrating outcomes.

• Consider recommending FBOs to use VISIBLE or other quality assurance and kite-mark tool designed to assist VCS organisations and FBOs communicate their
work to potential funders and partners.
• Factor in time to build trusting relationships, develop effective and sustainable community projects, and for FBOs to learn funding jargon, processes and adapt their working practices.
• Consider testing out new ideas and approaches on a small scale before implementing them more widely.
• Attention needs to be given to specific support needs of smaller, more informal community development type activities and groups.
• Ensure early and open communication and dialogue around funding cuts and other significant changes involving the VCS and faith/belief sectors.
• Review whether there is scope for improvement in the extent to which councillors engage with faith and/or belief groups alongside other stakeholders and address any barriers.
• Where not already done, consider mapping faith and belief activity and organisations (alongside the wider VCS) to help the local authority identify gaps in provision and avoid duplication.
• Where appropriate, ensure provision of faith and belief literacy training among councillors and officers, and seek to educate faith groups of the role of the council and its personnel.

Faith or belief organisations
• Recognise the similarities and distinctiveness in the activities, experiences and potential contribution of FBOs and representatives to those from the wider VCS.
• Develop more informed and strategic approaches to working with the public sector, other FBOs and the wider VCS with a view to developing collaborative work and securing additional resources, information and support, eg from public sector bodies and VCS infrastructure organisations.
• Identify and seek to address any training and/or support needs, including those around collaboration and partnership working.
• Recognise that representation and accountability can be supported by inter-faith forums and faith or belief organisations and that the following can be important legitimising qualities: being connected to various organisations and networks, having a good reputation, relevant expertise and knowledge, good personal networking and communication skills, and not claiming to speak on behalf of all faiths (or non-religious people).
• Inter-faith forums and belief organisations to consider whether there are any unmet support needs of representatives sitting on public sector governing bodies and partnerships.
• Ensure clarity, transparency and agreement over what counts as proselytising and failing to deliver on equalities, and seek to address any misplaced fears or anxieties around these eg through transparency, trust building, communication, ‘myth busting’ and demonstrating outcomes, etc. Be clear about what compromises are prepared to be taken to engage with others.
• Take steps to become better at articulating the work of FBOs, what they can offer, how they function, and what their conditions
and constraints are to statutory partners, funders and the wider VCS. As part of this, consider the use of VISIBLE or other quality assurance and kite-mark tool.

- Seek to forge better links with the wider VCS, particularly infrastructure organisations.

**VCS infrastructure organisations**

- Recognise the similarities and distinctiveness between FBOs and the wider VCS in relation to their activities, experiences, challenges and potential contribution.
- Develop more informed and strategic approaches to developing collaborative work and support with faith and inter-faith organisations.
- Create opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and engagement with FBOs and seek to determine if there are any distinctive or specialised support needs.
- Where appropriate, take support out to faith and belief groups and make efforts to understand how best to engage them, rather than expect them to attend events and training on site.
**Appendix 1: The role of faith and belief groups in partnership with councils**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faith and belief actors</th>
<th>Role in urban governance</th>
<th>Examples from case studies</th>
<th>Engagement with councils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith communities and belief groups</td>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others</td>
<td>Information giving Consultations Celebration and memorial events Beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith organisations and humanist and secularist organisations</td>
<td>Members</td>
<td>(a) Places of worship (b) Religious associations (c) Federations of groups (d) Community projects (e) Humanist and secular Societies</td>
<td>Information giving Consultations and lobbying Funding, commissioning and service provision Celebration and memorial events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith networks</td>
<td>Intermediaries</td>
<td>(a) Topic networks: dialogue groups, including in Leicester: Muslim-Christian women’s group; Muslim-Hindu group.</td>
<td>Information giving Consultations and lobbying Funding and commissioning Celebration and memorial events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious and community leaders’ networks and forums</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>(a) Formally constituted: Inter-faith forums (some include humanist representation) (b) Informally convened: Faith Leaders’ Forum (in Leicester); Multicultural Advisory Group (in Leicester) (c) Faith Regeneration Network; regional faith forums.</td>
<td>Information giving Consultations and lobbying Funding and commissioning Support and training Celebration and memorial events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith and belief representation</td>
<td>Partners</td>
<td>(a) Service-based: advisory groups for police, health, education (SACRE), etc. (b) Governance-based: strategic partnerships (eg LSP) (c) Theme based: eg equalities and diversity, cohesion, safeguarding children, preventing violent extremism</td>
<td>Information giving Consultations Celebration and memorial events Membership on governing bodies, committees and strategic partnerships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Lowndes and Chapman (2005)


Local Government Association
Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
Email info@local.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk

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