

The Bridge Builders Preston Project :

Summary of Our Findings

The Bridge Builders Preston Project was a year long pilot project funded by the MB Reckitt Trust, and carried out by Greg Smith Senior Research Fellow of the University of East London over 12 months to January 2006. It was supported by the Preston Forum of Faiths, the Association of Building Bridges Churches, Preston Christian Action Network, Preston City Council, and Avencentral SRB Partnership, all of whom sent reps to serve on a local steering group, and/or made meeting places available.

Our Aim

The project aimed to create a dialogue between the various faith communities represented in Preston and the numerous statutory agencies and local government departments who are working in or developing partnerships with organisations in the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector. By sharing and reflecting on our experiences we hoped to clarify some important policy issues and produce recommendations for good practice which would have both local and national significance.

The Process

We gathered information by in depth semi-structured interviewing of key individuals working in both faith and statutory sectors and by drawing people together in two workshops held in the autumn of 2005. At least 50 individuals and 25 organisations or statutory agencies / departments took part in the process at some level.

Further Details

Full Findings and various papers from the Project are being made available on a website at.... For anyone without broad band internet access the content of the web site can be made available either on a CD at a cost of £5 or as a full set of paper documents can at a cost of £25. Greg Smith is also willing to do presentations of the findings to gatherings of interested people.

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KEY FINDINGS

It was widely recognized that there were many positive elements in the desire of government agencies, nationally regionally and locally in Preston and Lancashire to engage in partnership with faith based organizations and to work for social cohesion across faith communities.

The faith sector recognizes many problems and issues which are shared with the wider voluntary and community sector, often centred around funding regimes which **are short term, always changing, time consuming, have tight deadlines, and are difficult to understand.**

The sector suffers from a lack of capacity to engage with the statutory funders and fears the strings that come with funding may overwhelm its priorities and subvert the charitable ethos, and silence any critical voice.

There is a degree of cynicism about the tokenism and tick box mentality of the statutory world and that cost cutting is the main agenda.

Faith groups share a world view that God is at work, that prayers are answered and the spiritual life is central. The statutory world finds it hard to talk about and evaluate such claims let alone accept that religious organizations can draw on these spiritual resources in their community and social work.

Faith groups naturally want to promote their beliefs to outsiders while statutory funders demand religion is kept strictly separate from social and community work. Such separation fundamentally contradicts the theological understanding of some religious groups.

Government seems to prefer multi-faith or inter-faith work and thus gives the impression they think all religions are the same. In fact there are substantial distinctive and sometimes exclusionary beliefs and practices within and across the faith traditions.

There is a lack of understanding and low level of religious literacy among many statutory agency staff which in some cases amounts to prejudice against faith groups. The minority of officers who have an in depth understanding of religion, often as an insider in one faith community may be a real asset for developing partnerships. However they can also be taken for granted, exploited as the token expert on the subject and work in a context where defining the boundaries of the personal and the professional can be difficult.

Statutory agency staff have some understandable frustrations that faith based groups do not understand their constraints, language and priorities and some genuine concerns over the practice of equal opportunities and social inclusion by religious groups.

Despite the problems, the need for learning on all sides and for improved policies to address important issues, there are plenty of opportunities for partnerships to progress. This will happen if all parties are willing to engage in honest open dialogue, to work at building trust, and to establish and keep under review clear protocols and guidelines for each project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These ideas were suggested by participants in the second workshop and are presented as ideas which should at least be reviewed and reflected on by local, regional and national policy makers working on the terms of engagement with the faith sector;

On relationships between the statutory sector and faith based groups

- **Any policy on relationships with the faith sector must be a live policy, understood and used in every department and by all staff (not just sit on a shelf).**
- **Policy must reflect a genuine commitment to work in partnership with the faith sector and must overcome the “tick box / tokenism” mentality that still exists in the statutory sector.**
- **Policy should be consistent, timely and accountable within a long term time frame.**
- **Policy should recognize the importance of “spirituality” in the way that faith based groups operate, and should not preclude the possibility of (voluntary) prayer or worship activity in the programme of service delivery. If a faith based organisation believes this ethos adds value it should be invited to demonstrate this with evidence.**
- **Clear and transparent guidelines about what can and cannot be done with public money in terms of religious activity should be written into any contracts, service level agreements, or offers of funding.**
- **Policies must take account of diversity within the sector, of local contexts, and of the culture, beliefs, practices and sensitivities of the different faith communities**
- **Rather than a blanket one size fits all policy on equal opportunities policy needs to be more flexible in recognising differences between/ within different cultural and faith groups and on different issues, respecting individuals’ right to believe and behave as they see fit.**
- **Policies should ensure an appropriate environment and range of services are available through a range of providers (to members of all faith communities and none) which are responsive to the choice of individuals**
- **In public and civic events and activities, ensure wide representation and that both common values and distinctive traits of various faith groups are recognised and honoured.. eg. around dietary provision, times of meetings.**

- **Faith communities should be consulted more effectively and involved in shaping decisions when policy is constructed which affects their members, neighbourhoods, public services and funding regimes.**
- **Build active and ongoing engagement from strategic to operational level with local faith forums, and provide support and resources for these forums to develop and involve a wider range of local faith groups.**
- **In the context of community cohesion work there is a need for monitoring the effectiveness and impact of interfaith activities**

On funding and capacity issues : Policies of relevance to the wider VCFS.

- **Offer long term strategic funding for the core activities of VCFS organisations (which run projects or services) not just short term funding, for innovative projects.**
- **Recognise that FBOs in particular do need to have professional management structures in place, though many need help to get there, and improved capacity building services are called for.**
- **It's reasonable to expect (funded VCFS organisations) should meet quality standards, but may need help to implement them**
- **All departments should be aware of and use “Compact” documents in service delivery plans. The Faith sector should be included in “Compact” agreements.**
- **As far as possible the funding application process and paperwork required for both bids and monitoring, should be simplified and standardised across the whole of the public sector (including major trust funders) so that the waste of time and effort, especially for unsuccessful bids is minimized. There is much to be said for larger funding requests to be handled through a two stage process where an initial expression of interest is evaluated for eligibility and viability before detailed and costed applications are submitted.**
- **Partnership and collaborative work rather than competitiveness should be rewarded by the funding process.**

On Public sector staffing issues:

- **All staff should receive religious literacy training appropriate to their role and in keeping with the local context, including information about the beliefs, cultures and organizations of all faiths (including Christianity), the diversity within them and the policy and legal issues around anti discrimination, equalities and diversity policies.**

- **Such training must be delivered in respectful interactive ways which are sensitive to where people are, and allow them to openly express their deep feelings, beliefs and values, including their ignorance and prejudices without feeling belittled or threatened.**
- **Where a post, or a staff member filling it, has a job description or person specification involving contact with religious groups in the local community the specialist skills and knowledge required should be recognized in workplans and remuneration. (This could be done either at recruitment, or by adjustments following appraisal processes). Insider knowledge of one or more faith groups should be counted as an asset for this sort of work. At the same time clear professional guidelines should be drawn up to deal with potential conflicts of interest, and to prevent the possibility of bias towards or against particular faith communities.**