

**Report: Croydon Faith and the Big Society - Interfaith Conversation
Jury's Inn, 25 November 2010**

1. INTRODUCTION

This report details the Interfaith Conversation which took place at the Jury's Inn on 25 November 2010. It provides a summary of speeches and key points arising from table discussions.

2. SUMMARY

The event brought together 50 representatives from the borough's faith and community organisations, statutory agencies and elected members.

The subsequent discussions focused on the relevance to, involvement with and capacity of the borough's faith organisations to respond to the Big Society debate and required commitments.

3. SPEECHES

The Leader of the Council and key faith representatives offered perspectives on the Big Society.

Insights included the view that Big Society was an opportunity to reduce 'Big' government and that socially it is a real opportunity, for the first time in generations to debate on how we want society to look.

It was noted that whilst faiths are distinctive and cannot be placed under a single banner, there is a need to identify a set of values that faith leaders wish to add to the Big Society debate.

Big Society remains an evolving concept which requires additional information, data and debate.

4. PLENARY SESSION

4.1 Question One

How can faith communities contribute to the Big Society and what resources are needed to support this?

The group suggested that in fact faith is already contributing by:

- Supporting people from different backgrounds;
- Offering language classes;
- Providing classes for elderly people without family support;
- Running free schools.

Yet with the above in mind it was also noted that faith cannot take on the role of government, it can only bridge the gaps.

On the matter of resources, the group discussed the fact that in the current climate services will need to be delivered with minimal funding.

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With limited funding available, the group questioned how faith can continue its support whilst also noting whether it is actually the responsibility of the local authority to provide funding.

The group suggested that to provide a solution more information is required on what the gaps are, how much knowledge and support there is available, where in the borough there are buildings with available space/rooms and how much capital and support others such as local corporate business and non-faith charities should be offering.

Top three issues or priorities

1. Identifying the values we are trying to achieve?
2. 'How do they get earthed' (connected with the live and neutral members of the communities).
3. Identifying current resources.

Actions (or resources) and who will take these forward

The group suggested a possible action arising would be for Faiths Together in Croydon to formulate a paper which indicates the structure of what is available and mapping what is happening.

4.2 Question Two

How can we map faith networks in the borough to support the Big Society initiative?

The group questioned what exactly Big Society meant. Without a full grasp of the concept it was felt the question was unanswerable. Questions included:

- What will the Big Society look like?
- Who will control it?
- Who will co-ordinate it?
- Who will identify the needs?
- How will groups operate within it?
- What happens when there is a lack of training or capacity?

The group suggested that mapping just the faith networks would be inadequate. Instead a full picture of all functions and interest groups would be needed. This would allow all groups access and opportunity to correctly sign post individuals or groups to relevant sources and support. This approach would ideally create a consistency of approach with common goals.

Top three issues or priorities

1. Map the need;
2. Match the need to capacity;
3. Who will co-ordinate? (Accountability).

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Actions (or resources) and who will take these forward

The group suggested that trained enablers who understood funding applications and were skilled in stakeholder relations would be well placed to help deliver the mapping.

It was suggested that a Big Society steering group could be formed to lead on this exercise and others.

4.3 Question Three

What are the big issues that are integral to taking forward the Big Society in Croydon and how can we address these?

A query raised by the group about whether faith groups are in fact doing enough in the borough. Additional points raised covered the following areas:

- An over dependence on the state to provide services;
- A lack of direction/understanding for organisations;
- How to be inclusive;
- Giving suitable encouragement;
- Reducing bureaucracy;
- Lack of ideas;
- Lack of communication;
- Not working in partnership enough (sharing of good practise and information);
- Not enough publicity.

Top three issues or priorities

1. Sustainability.
2. Not enough sharing of good practise and information.
3. Inclusivity.

Actions (or resources) and who will take these forward

On sustainability, the action required is to identify when the council needs to show leadership and partnership, and to help preserve the faith groups.

For number two, the action and responsibility will be for the faith leaders to meet and share their information.

The action required for inclusivity, is for the faith communities to go to where people are, and to not expect them to come for help.

4.4 Question Four

How can faith organisations improve their capacity in line with new opportunities and responsibilities?

Issues raised by the group included a lack of knowledge on what our capacity is to start with, looking at reducing bureaucracy and the ability to breakdown barriers such as legislation. A point was also raised about involving the media in promoting faith-related good news stories.

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Top three issues or priorities

1. Is there capacity within the faith communities to do more?
2. Would it be possible to establish a think-tank with a remit to look wider than just the faith communities?
3. What is the possibility of handing over buildings to faith communities for multi-use?

Actions (or resources) and who will take these forward

The first action put forward by the group is to identify the needs of the wider community and who is currently providing personal/public services through a mapping exercise. This could be the joint responsibility of faith communities and the local authority.

The second action is to identify who [the local authority, faith groups or other] will support or provide new services? It was suggested that Faiths Together in Croydon could lead on this work.

The final action was to explore opportunities for shared assets.

4.5 Question Five

If central government says the three key elements of the Big Society are social action, public service reform and community empowerment, what does this mean and what does it not mean for Croydon?

The group asked what quantifies social action.

- Is it faith groups stepping into compliment services?
- Is it mobilisation and creative utilisation of resources?
- Or is it a matter faith groups to identifying social needs?

On public service reform, the group suggested it was not just a process of reduction, but also a change in model.

For community empowerment, the group suggested it was a matter of:

- helping to facilitate and enabling;

On ensuring the right capabilities are demonstrated when providing services, it was also noted the importance of understanding that:

- lack of funding dis-empowers;
- removing barriers increases decision making, and:
- the importance of motivating volunteers.

Actions (or resources) and who will take these forward

The first key action would be to design and implement a survey of the borough's facilities and capabilities.

The second action would be to adopt an organisational model between the council and community groups that empowers decision making, but also ensures quality assurance, accountability and dialogue.

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5. CONCLUSIONS

Rev. Goodwin closed the meeting and thanked attendees for their support and insight.

It was noted the meeting had been successful in providing a base from which to further discuss the concept and issues surrounding the Big Society and faith.

As the first opportunity for a high level discussion, the conversation was exploratory rather than committal.

Key issues that were raised included:

- The necessity for state and local government to accept that faith has a limited capacity, and that it can step into some but not all of the gaps;
- Data needs to be made available on understanding the need, capacity of organisations and individuals, and how this can be regulated and monitored without bureaucracy.

It was also suggested that a continued dialogue should follow the event. Additional information will be provided on the schedule for future steps.