

## Report on Day Conference, Bristol, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2007

### Best Practice Consultation with Faith Groups

This was the second event on this theme within weeks, organised by the Consultation Institute as a vehicle to help public sector workers to improve their effectiveness in engaging faith communities in the consultative processes of all kinds in their working context.

The first event in London had over a hundred attendees with several prestigious speakers giving keynote addresses. This day was designed differently, as a seminar with 26 participants, and 2 staff. Seven people, spoke including Rhion Jones, seminar leader, who opened and closed the event and facilitated helpfully.

**Cllr. Peter Hammond, deputy leader of Bristol City Council** gave a brief concentrated key note account of why engagement by local authorities with faith communities is important, so that they are able to contribute in all kinds of consultation processes and take part in policy formation. Many of the varied faith communities present in British society today cut across ethnic boundaries, and hold common values that are important is social justice, care and cohesion. This is important even when increasing numbers of people refuse to associate with any faith community. This too is an aspect of dialogue that needs to be acknowledged.

Faith groups, he observed, can find themselves inhibited from contributing public policy formation

- a) Hampered by fear entertained in public agencies that thorough consultation with religious groups will lead to them being accused of promoting a particular religious view.
- b) Hampered by fears within communities themselves that engagement in consultation will be mis-interpreted as endorsing a particular political viewpoint.

Now there is a statutory obligation not to discriminate. Official guidance on this speaks about 'due regard to promote community cohesion', and obliges that particular groups be neither neglected nor favoured. Faith communities also need to be helped to exercise their rights to fair treatment.

**Rhion Jones** observed that what faith groups often have to contribute to the consultation process is *insight*, of a qualitative rather than a quantitative kind. He posed three questions to think about:

- a) Do we understand what dialogues work best?
- b) Do we have the right skills and processes to succeed?
- c) Will Government and local initiatives *work* better if we consult better?

**Amer Salmond**, an English Muslim convert, spoke about the Muslim perspective on consultation. He works for the Bristol Bangladeshi Association, and also heads an organisation called 'Islamic Understanding for the West' <http://www.iuftw.co.uk>, which offers training and cultural awareness for professionals to help non-Muslims develop an understanding of and relations with Muslims, communities, groups and businesses.

He asked that we consider whether consultation is about learning something new, or merely a strategy for justifying a predetermined position. Consultations fail if they do not build upon what has been learned in past processes. Consultation is distrusted when its recommendations are not implemented, and nothing changes.

A consultation strategy for working with Muslim communities must respect those co-opted as 'experts' and 'representative' of community, also recognise the importance of Mosque Committees, but go beyond these, soliciting views from Muslim community groups, people in business and professions etc; who may be more in touch with the facts on the ground than 'the usual suspects'.

The 2000 census reported 5,000 Muslims in Bristol, probably an under-estimate. Current estimates place the figure around 30,000, due to immigration. Faith adherence is growing among the poorer sectors. Muslims are organising and empowering themselves to participate in civic life, and even beginning to offer development support to other community groups (faith and non-faith) as a service to fellow citizens.

**David Maggs**, a Quaker working for Bristol Churches Council for Industry & Social Responsibility spoke about the challenge of appropriate consultation with different strands of Christianity: viz, the historic denominations, (place connected communities) the independent and evangelical churches experiencing significant growth as the former experience decline, (gathered mixed communities, for whom location is immaterial) and Black-led churches (language, identity and culture determined gatherings, with or without ownership of a place).

Churches, he pointed out a) meet regularly, b) are found in nearly all communities, c) deliver major services other than worship, d) are mostly diverse in ethnic and social background, e) have a high number of 'shapers in community' and active volunteers among members, f) are committed to improve life, g) are holders of community stories and memories.

If seeking Christian views a) who are you interested in hearing from? b) whom do you target? Christians will be allies of public bodies, but may hold policies incompatible with those which prevail in public life. How do you deal with this? Any feed back from consultation must include explanations, accounting for decisions that differ from expectation or contradict stated values. (*This is true of consulting with any religious group, not just Christians.*)

**Inder Singh**, a member of the Bristol Sikh community gave an introduction to Sikhism, and raised the question of why such reconciling 'ecumenical' religion, does not get consulted more than it does. Sikhs have a record of service to the poor of all backgrounds through the hospitality of the Langhar, the daily offering of a communal meal by the community that meets at the Sikh Gurdwara.

**Hazel Brittan**, SW regional co-ordinator for the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations spoke about the development of her organisation, and what it seeks to achieve in empowering members of 9,500 ethnic voluntary groups, of which, she said 60% are faith based. Another reason for Local Government to engage more seriously with faith communities.

**Kyle Hannan**, an English Buddhist, spoke about his innovative role as manager for a Bristol Community Radio project Station Salaam Shalom, which brings together Jews and Muslims learning about each other's religious lives, and broadcasts the encounter. This led to a valuable discussion about using Community Radio/TV and Internet Radio/TV as a resource for public debate, whether for religious communities, or people in a given locality, and how this might be broadcast on buses in shops, public buildings, cafés, as a way of generating interest and participation in public issues.

**Round Table discussion** focussed on Good Ideas to take away and mull over – the potential to use new technologies in socially useful ways caught the imagination. The other issue was the need to address the acknowledged deficiencies in knowledge and standard data (contact information, membership statistics etc; held on faith communities. There are no unifying standards, and big public bodies may hold different databases on the same subject organisations, and none of them are complete, or integrated. The very resources needed for Best Practice consultation to take place are often patchy and inadequate, despite availability of information held elsewhere in the public realm.

This was a valuable day, offering insight into the substance of the challenge that Spiritual Capital – Cardiff is now engaged with.