

SHEFFIELD FAITHS FORUM

ANNUAL MEETING

25 MARCH 2010

Introduction

This is the fourth annual meeting of the Faiths Forum and in 2010 there will be a rolling programme, which will involve changing the membership of the forum. The forum has been involved in a number of initiatives during the year and this report will give a flavour of the areas of work.

1. Sheffield City Council – City Strategy

In November 10 members and other partners were invited to make a presentation to the Sheffield First Partnership Board and to take part in discussions about the new City Strategy which will set the priorities for the city over the next 5 years. We were able to bring perspectives on Faith and the environment, Health & Well-Being, Faith & Economics & Faith in the Community. We were one of a number of communities of interest consulted directly and it was pleasing to see the contribution of faith communities recognised at this level.

One of the points which emerged was that part of the role of faith communities is as a conscience for the city, ensuring that the most vulnerable are taken seriously and their needs taken account of, and ensuring that resources are targeted where they are most needed. The Forum, Faith Leaders and many faith groups have been actively involved in this role over recent weeks, raising the implications of the Council's spending decisions for the coming year.

2. Sheffield City Council – New Corporate Equality Scheme

The Forum has also contributed to Sheffield City Council's new Corporate Equality Scheme. In the old Scheme faith was mentioned three times, as in 'Sheffield is a multi-faith city'. This time, faith & belief have been identified as a specific priority area, and we had some specific proposals which have been accepted in the draft document. If adopted as it stands, SCC will:

- Ensure that consultation strategies take into account working with faith groups.
- Support the development of a multi faith prayer space and retail chaplaincy in the city centre.
- Support capacity building of members of faith communities to become members of partnership and other boards to promote civic involvement.

- Develop a range of youth work interventions and opportunities with young people from faith communities.

The draft also states The Council has worked with SFF to recognise:

- The importance and worth of faith communities and their contribution to the life of the city.
- And the economic impact that faith communities contribute.
- And it says that the Council values working in partnership with SFF.

We look forward to seeing more of this in action in the coming year.

3. **SFF Conferences 2009/2010**

BME Network – ‘Preventing Violent Extremism Agenda

In 2009 two conferences were held with the BME Network on the ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ agenda, looking at what it was, whether we wanted to engage with it and how we might shape its development in Sheffield.

Key points to emerge from those conferences were that:

- The strategy as it was presented was Muslim biased and needed to be broader, and this needed to be clearly demonstrated by activity across the city.
- There needed to be a Sheffield approach, locally defined and agreed, with a shared understanding.

As a result of those conferences SCC asked and funded us to form an Advisory Group made up of members of Faith and BME groups, and other interested VCF sector members. We advertised across OFFER’s networks and recruited 12 people. The group now meets monthly, commenting on the programme, and giving responses to police and council initiatives. Two members sit on the Joint Council & Police Strategy Group, and The Advisory Group has been described as ‘a genuine partner making a valuable contribution to the shaping of the PREVENT agenda’

SHEBEEN Conference – ‘Climate Change’

In January 2010 SFF held a conference with SHEBEEN, Sheffield’s BME Environment Network, on Faith and the crisis of climate change. The aim was to ask what contribution faith perspectives bring to issues of climate change and to explore what a faith perspective would look like. Seventy three people attended workshops exploring Baha’i, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim and Pagan perspectives and it was very well received.

Jenny Patient, from Sheffield Campaign against Climate Change, said, ‘We’ve made links with faith groups before, but this event has brought extra depth to my thinking on how we can address climate change together.’

We aim to hold a further conference this year to develop more links with other partners and agencies.

4. Update on Priorities for 2009

The 2009 review outlined areas of work for SFF involvement. These included projects with Community Forums and faith communities in each of the 7 new Community Assembly Areas. So far projects have been running in six of those areas.

Norma Ashmore, from Parson Cross Community Forum, said in her report, ‘The process of engaging with faith organisations was well received, and I felt that it was making a difference to how the faith organisations interacted with the community. It also started them interacting with each other and talking about how they could unite in a common purpose that would benefit them all.’

SFF also commissioned work with two projects which have gone on to secure further funding. One was a Women of Faith Project managed by Shiregreen United Reformed Church. The other was St Mary’s Church, Bramall Lane, who approached SFF to help with a project exploring language acquisition in ESOL classes which they had been running for several years. It was a good example of a faith based project meeting the needs of local people, working with other partners and influencing service delivery. As a result of our involvement they have gone on to secure three years funding to develop better approaches and methods, in something which may well have a much wider impact than just the local area.

5. Priorities for 2010/11

2010/11 is the third and final year of funding from Capacity Builders Improving Reach programme. As well as developing links at various levels in the city to maintain a strong independent voice for faith communities, there are other emerging areas of work.

SFF are continuing to develop programmes to enable faith communities to work together with partners, and are running How Your City Works for Faith Communities and Faith Leader, Workers & Volunteers courses.

Education: SFF are supporting a conference exploring issues of children with Special Educational Needs in Madrassahs in conjunction with Mohammad Ismail, the Council’s Children & Young People’s Department and educational specialists. We also have planned a half day conference for members of all faith communities involved in Child Protection issues. In May we are supporting a conference exploring spiritual spaces in schools, and have helped to link local and national experts to run workshops.

We have begun to develop more links with both of the Universities, and have had meetings with Sheffield University Student Faiths Forum members.

SFF has been approached by a number of Chaplaincies in the city, and have begun discussions on ways to work together.

Muslim Women: A number of Muslim women have talked to us who are interested in helping to connect the many individuals and Muslim women's organizations in the city to help build a strong, independent voice to engage with statutory partners and agencies, and to build confidence and skills. We have talked with 'Together for Regeneration' as partners to help take this work forward.

SFF Resources: This year one of the two staff posts has been vacant, which has had a knock on effect. One of the effects has been a limit on the amount of reporting, publicising and promoting of our work that we have been able to do. This is one of our priorities over the coming months, including re-launching our website and producing printed materials and reports.

Also, Jennie Beard has undertaken highly significant and successful neighbourhood work since taking up post as Local Faith Networker in October 2009. The work she has started will continue to grow during the coming year.

6. Future Challenges

OFFER

2010 will be a challenging year. The work of the Faiths Forum has been developed within OFFER, Sheffield's Community Empowerment Network, and for good reason. OFFER was instrumental in the formation of the Faiths Forum, and basing our work in OFFER has enabled us to benefit enormously from its experience, skills, links and network support. SFF's work will be made harder by the loss of the depth and breadth of support received from OFFER.

During 2010 The Faiths Forum will need to make decisions about its future and about what it will look like. We will need to identify where we are having the most impact and explore the options for getting support to continue work in those areas.

SFF is aiming for the contribution that faith groups make to the life of the city to be recognised, valued and seen as a normal way of working here in Sheffield, and SFF have made considerable steps towards achieving that this year.