



Inter Faith Network Newsletter

23 February 2024 – Extra

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This edition is an ‘Extra’ issued on 23 February 2024. It includes a press release issued yesterday on behalf of IFN’s Board. It also includes links to some media coverage about IFN’s closure.

INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK BOARD ANNOUNCES CLOSURE OF CHARITY DUE TO WITHDRAWAL OF GOVERNMENT FUNDING – 22 FEBRUARY 2024

The Board of Trustees of the Inter Faith Network for the UK met today. It has, with much regret, agreed that the charity will close.

This is linked to withdrawal by Government of funding for July 2023-March 2024 offered in July 2023, subject to conditions. In a letter to IFN’s Co-Chairs from Secretary of State Rt Hon Michael Gove MP of 21 February, it was confirmed that the offer of funding was being withdrawn. This was for reasons foreshadowed in an earlier letter from him to them of 19 January, to which they had responded in detail (see statement of 24 January <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/news/statement-on-a-letter-received-by-ifns-co-chairs-from-secretary-of-state-levelling-up-housing-and-communities-rt-hon-michael-gove-mp>).

Mr Gove’s letter of 21 February notes that: “The Government has had a policy of non-engagement with the MCB since 2009. Whilst I recognise that the MCB was already a member of the Inter Faith Network when the previous offer of funding was made, I find their membership regrettable and it is deeply concerning that an MCB member could be appointed into your core governance structure. This increases the proximity between government funding and an organisation (the MCB) with which the Government has a long-standing policy of non-engagement. This is even more important in the case of funding for a prominent and nationally active organisation such as the IFN, which would carry too great a risk of compromising the credibility and effectiveness of that policy.”

The Board has sought with energy to diversify IFN’s funding base. However, the kind of work done by infrastructure and backbone bodies - such as linking, sharing good practice and fostering dialogue - is not eye-catching and easy to fund and does need some financial support from Government. IFN’s Board was glad to receive from Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in July 2023 the offer of £155,000 fresh funding for the period July 2023 – March 2024 (approximately 50% of its budget this year). It is deeply disappointed that despite IFN having stood ready throughout the process to have dialogue with the Government, no opportunity was offered for that and that – over seven months after the offer of funding (subject to conditions) – withdrawal of funding appears necessary to Mr Gove for the reasons that he outlines.

As IFN's Co-Chairs had earlier explained to Mr Gove in a response of 22 January to his letter of 19 January, "It is fully understood that Government can choose not to engage with bodies for reasons that it is not required to make public. However, it would be difficult for a charity to do so where a body has not been proscribed, had legal action taken against it or unless there were to be a clear issue of reputational damage (not always, of course, a straightforward matter to judge)."

IFN's Co-Chairs also commented that: "It is not easy to see how IFN's purpose (the value of which it has always been believed the Government appreciates) could be achieved by sowing division - and division would certainly be sown if there was an attempt to expel from membership, without its having been proscribed, found guilty of illegal actions or in some way acted so as to bring reputational damage to IFN, an organisation that has among its members (and therefore represents) over 500 national, regional and local Muslim organisations, mosques, charities and schools. Although the Government can choose not to engage with it, that is not a sensible option open to the IFN if it is to achieve the purposes for which the Government funds it in the first place."

The background to IFN's engagement with the Department over this matter of funding can be seen via links on the homepage of the IFN website at www.interfaith.org.uk.

The matter has been repeatedly raised by Parliamentarians, including through an Adjournment Debate on 10 January and an Urgent Question from Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP on 22 February, with cross-party contributions about the importance of IFN's work. There have also been letters to MPs and Ministers from across the UK, as well as articles and statements by national faith community bodies, local inter faith groups and others, and a petition set up by a local inter faith practitioner.

Neither the careful and considered response of IFN's Board, nor the widespread support and concern at the potential loss of the Inter Faith Network for the UK have led Mr Gove to reconsider his position.

Therefore, the organisation is now on the path to closure and IFN Trustees and staff will be working to bring the organisation's work to a close and to preserve its legacy in ways that enable others to build strongly on that in the future.

Statement on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Inter Faith Network for the UK

22 February 2024

A copy of the above was also issued as a press release and can be seen, with its 'editors' notes', on the IFN website at <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/news/news-release-inter-faith-network-for-the-uk-board-announces-closure-of-charity-due-to-withdrawal-of-government-funding>.

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MEDIA COVERAGE

News about IFN's likely closure, and then the confirmation of this, has attracted a broad spread of media coverage since IFN's News Release of 8 February. This includes:

National media

BBC - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68365887>

BBC – Coverage of Parliament - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001x2th/house-of-commons-inter-faith-network-urgent-question> (video of Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP raising an urgent question in the House of Commons yesterday morning and contributions of MPs)

The Evening Standard - <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/government-muslim-council-of-britain-stephen-timms-theresa-villiers-michael-gove-b1141000.html>

The Guardian - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/16/inter-faith-network-headed-for-closure-as-gove-minded-to-withdraw-funding>

The Independent - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/government-muslim-council-of-britain-stephen-timms-theresa-villiers-michael-gove-b2500919.html>

The Times - <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/anti-muslim-hatred-in-uk-has-tripled-since-hamas-attacks-fp689kcxv> (part of a longer item on religious news)

A number of the articles above are based on an AP (Associated Press) piece that was also re-used by many local and regional newspapers.

Faith sector media

The Baptist Times - https://baptist.org.uk/Articles/683225/The_Inter_Faith.aspx

Church Times - <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/16-february/news/uk/closure-looms-for-interfaith-charity-because-of-government-concerns-over-muslim-trustee>

Ekklesia - <https://www.ekklesia.co.uk/2024/02/17/19186/>

The Friend - <https://thefriend.org/article/inter-faith-network-faces-imminent-closure>

Independent Catholic News - <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/49197>

Jewish News - <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/government-criticised-after-shutting-down-main-forum-for-jewish-muslim-dialogue/>

Premier Christian News - <https://premierchristian.news/us/news/article/interfaith-network-leaders-lament-closure-as-govt-pull-funding-over-islam-council-issue>

Religion Media Centre - held a press briefing on IFN's potential closure last Thursday. There is a summary report at <https://religionmediacentre.org.uk/news/the-devastating-outrageous-impending-closure-of-the-inter-faith-network/> and the video of the briefing can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whmG4ojSKqg&feature=youtu.be>.

Theos Think Tank - <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2024/02/09/from-test-acts-to-relational-tests-on-the-imminent-and-avoidable-closure-of-the-inter-faith-network>

Charity/ Third Sector media

Directory of Social Change - <https://www.dsc.org.uk/content/the-sector-should-be-deeply-worried-by-the-governments-actions-in-forcing-the-closure-of-a-charity/>

Civil Society News - <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/concerns-raised-as-government-withdraws-charity-funding-over-trustee-s-links.html>

Civil Society News - <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/voices/hassan-joudi-ifn-having-to-close-over-my-appointment-should-concern-charities.html> - Personal reflection from IFN Trustee Hassan Joudi

Civil Society News - <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/charity-plans-to-close-as-government-withholds-funding-over-trustee-concerns.html>

Third Sector Magazine - <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/governments-withdrawal-funds-interfaith-charity-sets-terrible-precedent-sector-leaders-warn/governance/article/1862539>

Third Sector Magazine - <https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/interfaith-charity-prepares-close-six-month-delay-government-funding/governance/article/1861144>

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