

THE INTER FAITH NETWORK FOR THE UK

Note of Link Meeting for Local Inter Faith Organisations in the North East of England

from 10.30am to 12.45pm on Thursday 20 January 2022

by Zoom

Present: Mr Ian Hunter Smart (County Durham Faiths Network); Ms Jolande Mace (Middlesbrough Interfaith Network); Mr Kersi Fanibunda (Newcastle Faith Leaders' Group/Newcastle Council of Faiths); Mr Jim Robertson (North East Regional Faiths Network); and the Revd Chris Howson (Sunderland Interfaith Forum).

In attendance: Mr Ashley Beck (Chair) and Ms Kirsty Healey, Inter Faith Network for the UK.

Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Mr Ashley Beck welcomed participants to this IFN regional link meeting for local inter faith organisations in the North East of England. He would be chairing the meeting in place of his colleague, IFN's Executive Director who was at a funeral.
2. Apologies were noted. Mr Paul Southgate (South Tyneside) had provided a written update which Kirsty Healey would be sharing later in the meeting.¹
3. Those present introduced themselves.
4. A time of silent reflection was held to remember those working for good inter faith relations around the world.
5. Mr Beck explained that the meeting would be minuted and participants would be sent the minutes in draft for clearance. If an attendee preferred that a point not be included in the note, they were asked to say so. Consent was sought, (and given by all in attendance), for the meeting to be recorded. Screengrabs of the meeting would be taken for social media and reporting purposes; if participants did not wish to have their photograph used for such purposes, they should indicate. (No objections)

Agenda Item 2: Round table sharing of news, information and ideas

6. Each group was invited to share news and to use this as an opportunity for discussion or to pick up key themes to be discussed later in the meeting (time permitting).

¹ Invited but not present were: Gateshead Inter Faith Forum; Cleveland Inter Faith Group. The representative from Gateshead and the main representative from Newcastle Council of Faiths registered but were on the day unable to attend.

7. Mr Kersi Fanibunda said:
 - The Council of Faiths meets about 2 to 3 times a year.
 - The Committee meets separately, with the Officers setting the agenda. We have another meeting where anybody can attend.
 - Various members are involved in charity work
 - We invite people to give a talk on different topics.
 - We have a peace walk every year. We start from the gurdwara and then go to the Hindu temple and then the cathedral and then the synagogue, and at each place we have a bit of food.
 - We celebrate the different faiths' festivals eg New Year and Diwali.
 - This year we have a tree planting ceremony at the civic centre for Holocaust Memorial Day which is coming up.
 - Religious leaders have contacts which enable them to disseminate to the community anything there is to report on.
 - Over the years, the Religious Leaders group had spoken to the Police Academy about and faith and cultural traditions of the different community members. There had been meetings at the Police Academy and a member of the Leaders group would speak about their personal religion for 20 minutes on an annual basis. From this year, onward, this would now be taken over by the University. The involvement of the University was good.

8. Ms Jolande Mace (Middlesbrough Interfaith Network) asked if NCF's annual peace walk took place on a specific date. Mr Fanibunda replied that they usually held it before the winter started, in September or October. The police were always contacted beforehand (NFLG had good contacts with the police) and they escorted the Faith Walk. Usually, members walked from venue to venue but that this year they had had a bus, which NFLG members had enjoyed (however this would not always happen!).

9. Mr Jim Robertson (North East Regional Faiths Network) said that, in terms of things happening on the ground in Newcastle, he had been impressed by the way that the faith groups had been working very closely with other faith groups through Citizens UK campaigns on topics such as women's issues and violence on the Tyne and Wear Metro. It was important to pick up and share this kind of information about practical social engagement in regional sharing contexts.

10. Mr Beck said anything that groups had been involved in on an inter faith basis would be useful to share. Agenda Item 4: 'Working in partnership for the common good' would be a good opportunity to explore other types of engagement, including through CitizensUK.

11. He commented on the importance of inter-organisational collaboration, especially over the last 2 years. During the COVID pandemic many new partnerships and collaborations between inter faith groups and others had emerged. These had often included emergency preparedness groups and local authorities. Some were short term; others had a longer life.

The Sunderland Interfaith Forum

12. The Revd Chris Howson said:

- Inter Faith Week 2021 was the biggest one we have had in the 9 years I have been involved with it. In 2020 the Inter Faith Week walk had to be virtual. For 2021 there was a real desire to go back to the in person Inter Faith Walk. It was our ninth one.
- The Peace Walk has been growing each year. Over 100 people came on the walk this year. There was a real demand it. We had a request about having a bus but people were not so keen, in the COVID context, on being with others in a bus and they really wanted to be walking. The walk was really good. We had fewer locations. We visited three places: the gurdwara, St John's Methodist Church, and the main mosque on Chester road. These are big venues so we were not anxious about mingling inside (although we were wearing masks given the continuing concerns about COVID).
- We had a big online gathering around COP26. We had different faith perspectives on the environment as Inter Faith Week came just at the end of COP26. That was really good to hear Jewish, Buddhist and Christian voices. We had people who are Christian and Buddhist who were active in Glasgow at the time, which was great.
- We had schools contacting us again, asking us to go in. This didn't happen last year due to COVID but this year we went to two schools during Inter Faith Week to give talks. Schools have not wanted to have too many outside speakers so we were greatly encouraged that we were approached and asked to do that.
- For Holocaust Memorial Day, we usually have a big thing in Sunderland Minster. This year, as last year, we have decided to record a video, and broadcast it from around the 27th. We have just finished compiling that with members of different faith groups contributing.
- We have been clearing up graveyards. Sunderland used to have the largest Jewish population in the North and there is an old Jewish grave yard (just outside of the city) that has been in a state of dereliction for about 25 years.
- We have worked with the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Council and environmental groups to clear the graveyard. This has been a lovely thing because people can get together and physically do things outside – in a safe way. This has been an interesting project to work on and it will continue over the next couple of years as there is a lot more work to be done. We also want a Blue Plaque to celebrate the Jewish history there.
- On the University front, the University has really invested in the inter faith centre. Over the summer £35,000 has been spent doing it up, giving it new carpets, new furnishings and new signs. The reopening took place on 14 December, by the Vice- Chancellor. If you want to visit Sunderland do come and visit the centre, it is lovely.
- Unlike Newcastle University, Sunderland University did not have police contacts but it held events for Paramedic and Medical students at the university similar to the kinds described by Mr Fanibunda. It was important for the Paramedic students as the uptake for the course was 99% white local people who may not have knowledge about what to do when entering homes of people of different faith communities. The Medical course had a more diverse intake of students.

13. Mr Fanibunda noted that in Newcastle there was a similar ground for Jewish burial and there was the site of an old synagogue at which the Inter Faith Walk usually stopped to pay respects.
14. Mr Howson said that a historically important Art Deco synagogue in Sunderland, designed by Marcus Kenneth Glass, had been set to be sold to the Beamish Museum so it could be transported and saved. However, plans had fallen through due to lack of funds. It had been the last new synagogue to have been built before Hitler came to power and was the last exuberant and hopeful synagogue in Europe from that time. There was no Jewish community in Sunderland any more – only around 14 Jewish inhabitants. There had been storm damage from Storm Arwen but that had been repaired. In response to a question, he said that the synagogue was a listed building. There had been various proposals to convert it into flats but due to its listed status, these plans had been declined. This has saved its beautiful interior. However, the listed status meant that that it had been hard to find a use for the building and no further investors could be found. That meant it was in a lot of danger.
15. Mr Beck commented that it was good to hear of the investment at the Sunderland University inter faith centre and asked The Revd Howson what had led the University to invest in the inter faith centre.
16. Mr Howson replied that the reason had been COVID. During COVID, all services had moved online, even wellbeing and counselling, not a bit of support could be done face-to-face. The chaplaincy had been the last body operating face-to-face with people in need. During the COVID period the Chaplaincy had organised activities to help with isolation such as Well Being Walks around the city (currently people could be taken further afield on a coach). The chaplaincy had been the last group of people going in bringing items such as toilet rolls and prescriptions to students in need, such as international students who had been stranded and unable to afford to go home. Students had been supported a lot by the chaplaincy and the positive feedback had been immense. The investment had come at a time of cut backs for the university and was seen as recognition of the importance that the students placed on the chaplaincy.
17. Mr Beck commented that some similar stories had been heard in recent meetings about chaplaincies being a lifeline for students, particularly international students who had been stuck on campus.
18. Mr Howson said that there had been lots of wonderful interventions during that period. The different faith groups had really stepped up to the mark. The local gurdwara had been provided food for students who had been stuck in the university halls of residence. The foodbank had become very important for the students and for those connected to local churches.
19. In response to a question from Mr Robertson about whether any the other faith groups engaged, as well as Christian ones, in the ‘Liberation Theology’ events held at the University, Mr Howson said that was not the case locally but nationally he thought some other groups engaged. An annual national Liberation Theology

event was held at Sunderland University's Victor Jara Liberation Theology Library (<https://sj.sunderland.ac.uk/wellbeing/chaplaincy/study-library/>) The last two years' events had been held online. He hoped that next year the event could return in person to Sunderland.

Middlesbrough Interfaith Network

20. Ms Mace said:

- I started work at Middlesbrough Council in November 2020 (as Strategic Cohesion and Migration Manager). That was at the height of the COVID pandemic. My predecessor, who chaired the Inter Faith Network, had left in July 2020. During the pandemic there was no formal inter faith network. It had been amalgamated into the Local Resilience Forum because of the need for a faith perspective on death management.
- When I came into post, we relaunched the Middlesbrough Inter Faith Network (MIFN) to a degree. However, up until its last meeting, in December, it was heavily focused on COVID, how different faith organisations were responding to COVID and the impact it was having on their communities. Perhaps as a result of that, some faith groups in Middlesbrough started to drop out because they wanted a broader type of engagement – with the kinds of issues being talked about in the present meeting.
- At a meeting in December, I encouraged people to go to Champions Network in terms of COVID. However, I also developed a Terms of Reference with the hope of MIFN developing its work more generally on the community cohesion and resilience front. I am hopeful that we can breathe new life into MIFN.
- There was little to no interest in any activities for Inter faith Week.
- We are having a tree planting ceremony for Holocaust Memorial Day, at which one of our local imams will be speaking. I am hoping this will be a catalyst for bringing various faith communities back together.
- There is much to do in terms of outreach, combatting loneliness and isolation and working in the communities, helping through such routes as bringing food packages and prescriptions to those in need.
- The faith communities in Middlesbrough have done tremendous work over COVID and I think I need to bring that work together in a group where we can share that information. I am hopeful that in the next couple of meetings, we can start to bring that about and we can move focus away from COVID.

21. The Revd Howson said that churches and other faith communities in Sunderland had moved swiftly to serve during the worst times of COVID and they were also very active online. But emerging from the pandemic, there is a sense of moving out of a time of purpose and some faith groups are experiencing difficult times. Anglican churches have opened with only half the usual congregation present. Two Anglican churches, three Methodist churches and two URC churches have closed, four of those being in the city centre. A decline in numbers has been experienced at a local gurdwara. Places with a slightly elderly population have particularly struggled. Had there been a comparable situation in Middlesbrough?

22. Ms Mace said that she was not aware of any church closures. A number of faiths used community buildings for congregational meetings and that had stopped during the pandemic when many had moved online. There had been discussion

about churches' reliance on congregational giving of funds and the impact on that giving of people not meeting in person. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which asked for donations via Direct Debit, had in fact seen donations increase. So the position was mixed.

Mr Ian Hunter Smart joined the meeting

23. Mr Robertson commented that Middlesbrough was one of the five important local authority areas that made up Teesside. As far as he knew there were no inter faith meetings presently in the other authority areas of Stockton, Hartlepool, Darlington and Redcar (although the [United Reformed Church] (URC) had some initiatives in Redcar). It was important, when looking at the region, to recognise the Teesside conurbation and the complexities of it. The ethnic diversity of Teesside was probably greater than most other places in the UK and this was relevant in terms of a number of issues and concerns. Compared to the position in the past there seemed to him to be a lack of energy or commitment in these 5 local areas to meet together to discuss inter faith and other issues. He asked Ms Mace for her own perception of this.
24. Ms Mace agreed. At one point she had suggested a Tees-wide inter faith group. There had been interest in that – but only if she would agree to chair it. However, she was not able to take that on.
25. Mr Howson asked Ms Mace how the current asylum seeker/ refugee situation fed into the work being done. This had always been integrated into the work of Sunderland. Middlesbrough had a higher number of dispersal and refugees staying in the area. Had this had much impact on the inter faith work recently?
26. Ms Mace responded that she thought not. A large proportion of asylum seekers, refugees who were in Middlesbrough were Muslim and a number of mosques served as community centres for these individuals, A strong Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) partner of the Council's, which worked with asylum seekers, was the Methodist Asylum Project (MAP). MAP had been a place where the individuals had built their community despite faith differences. The project manager for MAP was part of the MIFN, as were some trustees of MAP.
27. Mr Robertson commented, in reference to his previous point on working with the local authority, that the inter faith group that Ms Mace was linked to embraced the local authority. It was not a separate group to that. This had been so, distinctively, since the establishment of the Middlesbrough inter faith group. For a good number of years it always held meetings in a public body space to demonstrate to the various services eg housing and social services that the issues that were discussed were of relevance to the local authority, the group was not negotiating with a group outside of its self. The meetings had been chaired by the leader of the local council for 5 years on the basis. This was on his basis that if he was going to learn about it he had to be involved in it. This was imaginative and interesting. He did not think this happened elsewhere.
28. Ms Mace agreed that the position Mr Robertson outlined was still the case in Middlesbrough.

29. Mr Beck said that in some other places in England groups had strong links with local authorities, in some cases with local authority officers playing a role in convening the meetings. In some cases, this pattern had its origin in Local Strategic Partnerships and went back 10 to 20 years. In a few places, the Mayor was made a trustee or patron of the local inter faith group which helped to build this connection. This seemed to work well in areas where it was done.
30. Mr Howson added that in Sunderland's case it had been the leader of the Council, Charles Slater who had been involved in the foundation of the group. He was a member of the Jewish community. There had been a close connection between the council and the inter faith group when it had started but that link had gone by the time he became involved with the group. Then the police had become interested in creating links, post-9/11 and with PREVENT, and in having lines of communication with the inter faith community and Muslim communities. This had continued for a couple of years but that the police interest in the area had also been lost. There were a few people the group worked with in the council but this relationship was not as strong as it should be.
31. Mr Beck asked Ms Mace if she had thought about recording the contribution and support, throughout the COVID pandemic, of faith communities and faith organisations, perhaps in a video or a booklet. Ms Mace replied that the COVID Champions Network held the role of celebrating best practice and said she would raise this idea with them as a good idea and action to take.

County Durham Faiths Network (CDFN)

32. Mr Ian Hunter Smart explained that he was speaking in place of the chair of CDFN who had contracted COVID. He said:
- I have been involved as a County Council Officer since the beginning of CDFN, about 2007, working with the then Churches Regional Commission to look at setting up the CDFN.
 - It has always been a small but diverse group of people.
 - It is informal, there are around 30 – 40 people on the mailing list, from about 8 or 9 different faith communities.
 - It is a small network but diverse and going well.
 - I attend in a personal capacity as a person of faith and in my role in the voluntary sector at Durham County Council, to try to make connections.
 - The people who have participated in CDFN, over the years have been from wide cross section of faiths. People who are particularly active in their faith communities are more likely to live in the conurbations where their places of worship are.
 - Country Durham is not a diverse place, apart from the University which has two prayer rooms for Muslim students. There are no other non-Christian places of worship in the County.
 - Gavin Wort, chaplain at the University of Durham, was elected as Chair of CDFN at the AGM last June. Since he has taken over, it has worked at revising its constitution as there were a number of anomalies in that.
 - Gavin has tried to make CDFN more accessible and there are now regular trustee/ management meetings as well as ordinary meetings of the network.

- The chaplaincy connection has opened up links with the various faith student societies in the university which has been of great benefit.
- We usually meet about 4 times a year for ordinary meetings to talk about particular topics and share about what is going on in our local areas or communities.
- Pre-COVID, we used to have at least one or two larger network meetings where a particular topic would be discussed and up to half a dozen speakers from different faith communities were invited to give a personal perspective on that particular topic. We want the personal and experiential feel. So we tried to make it very personal – speakers were not there as representatives of a particular faith community or tradition. These meetings have been very successful.
- When COVID struck, we moved things online and that has worked quite well. The Inter Faith Week events, for the last two years, have had about thirty people coming along and a number attending from the university.
- In 2020, our topic for Inter Faith Week was ‘Pilgrimage’ and we had different people’s perspectives and experiences of pilgrimage.
- In 2021, our topic was ‘Human Flourishing: Living Well in Challenging Times, a personal faith perspective’. That was very interesting to hear from different people of different faiths on that topic.

33. Mr Hunter Smart went on to make some broader points:

- There have been a number of national reports recently about the role of faith communities in COVID and a bit of a push, from the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), about the Faith Covenant idea. I would be interested to hear people’s views about that.
- Faith communities’ contribution to health and wellbeing in communities is an area of interest. We have 14 area Action Partnerships across the area, working with Joanne Thornes at North East Churches Acting Together and we have done a number of events across the county. Those have mainly been with Christian denominations but occasionally people from other faith communities. However, occasionally we have had different faith communities, looking at contributions to health and wellbeing and how we can work better in partnership.
- An initiative of our elected members prior to COVID was a series of hour-long breakfast seminars on particular topics with an invited keynote speaker and discussion. We have addressed some challenging topics in those and the sessions were helpful in keeping faith on the agenda. However, these stopped due to COVID as the seminar were not easy to do online.

North East Regional Faiths Network (NERFN)

34. Mr Robertson said:

- I work very closely with Ian. These activities we work on are trying to get authorities thinking beyond just linking with dioceses or churches and to encourage engagement with and by faith groups more widely. Faith organisations can help the local authorities to do their job better.

- We have 12 local authorities in the North East region. In my assessment, 5 of the 12 have active inter faith groups and what I have tried to do is to keep up to speed with what is happening in each area.
 - It was significant that Middlesbrough's inter faith engagement was happening in the public square. But COVID, over the last 2 years, has broken that up.
 - There is an embryonic inter faith group in South Tyneside and work is underway with that.
 - South Tyneside, in terms of ethnic groups, has the longest history of people from a background there, but they have not moved too far on that.
 - If we look from the North down, to my knowledge there is little active engagement from Northumberland. There were some movements with a mosque in Blythe at one point. There is not a lot of active work in North Tyneside in terms of the local authority or in terms of a group.
 - Gateshead have not been represented well at these link meetings, even though there are things happening in Gateshead with an inter faith group.
 - Other than these link meetings, I don't have any evidence of links between different places or a desire on the part of groups in different area to do things together or to discuss together common issues. People seem mainly interested in their own areas and not very interested in what's happening elsewhere in the region.
 - Stockton Thrive, which is a poverty related group, does try to engage with some of these issues and in Northumberland, they're building a Poverty Truth Commission (there is one in Gateshead and one in Stockton) which might well bring different groups together. It is helpful to have this sort of sharing but I don't know if there is an agenda for sharing collectively.
35. Mr Beck said that Paul Southgate from South Tyneside had sent a written update. Gateshead had been planning to attend, but had been unable at the last moment to do so.
36. Mr Howson commented, in relation to the previous contribution on 'faith in the public square', that Sunderland had always proceeded on the assumption that most faith leaders would be able to get on and have meetings and meet with the council. Its attention had needed to focus on how people at the grass-roots were engaged. This was partly due to issues related to the far – right stirring up resentment about faiths in the city centre and the priority had been to challenge that. Over the COVID period, there had been an issue around Black Lives Matter and the far- right defending statues but on the whole the far right had taken their focus off of faith communities and had instead looked towards anti-vax. This was thought likely to change now and so public events, with people meeting together to change the agenda was, was now a focus.
37. He highlighted 'The Big Lunch' in June as the first time that people could be brought back together. There had been a desire to come back together and that event, this year at the time of the celebrations for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, might draw local authority support for that. Sunderland was looking to make this an inter faith celebration, rather than a local authority or single-church organised event. This would bring the faiths into the heart of that conversation. This was a reflection on 'faith in the public square' and that might work well in Durham too.

38. Mr Robertson said that Durham was slowly changing as a county. Five years ago, when Syrian refugees arrived, Durham had had no experience of dealing with refugees. In the anxiety of the local authority to do the right thing and act sensibly, it had developed a 'humanitarian task force'. This had been comprised of elected members and operational officers. The feedback had been successful as the task force had facilitated different departments in the local authority working together, rather than the departments working in silos. This had been picked up on and continued when the Afghan community arrived.
39. Durham was currently having to deal with the establishment of an immigration detention centre in Medomsley with 80 women from varied backgrounds and probably quite a variety of faith back grounds living together in a prison. He wondered how the faith groups and local authorities viewed and would engage with that. The church groups had made a good response to that drawing on learning from other areas in the country.
40. He said the demographic picture of the North East has changed hugely over the last 40 years. He was unsure if the faith groups had changed organisationally in response to this. He noted that the Churches had withdrawn support for ecumenical services and other types of chaplaincies that might be involved in the kind of work needed. He was sorry that the United Reformed Church (URC) Ecumenical and Inter Faith Officer, Andy Lie, was not at the meeting as his role was focused on ecumenical and inter faith relations in the URC. He would report back to him from this meeting to keep him in touch with the issues discussed.
41. He added that NERFN, as an umbrella organisation, was largely ineffective at present for some of the reasons he had talked about earlier. Also, in the north of the region, the region now had the North of the Tyne Authority. This was a divisive process (breaking up Newcastle, North Tyneside and Northumberland from the other authorities). Regionally in a political sense, the arguments about joining the region up all seemed to be about transport rather than people and social agendas.
42. Mr Beck invited comments or questions on earlier contributions or on emerging themes. (None offered)

South Tyneside

43. The following update was read out. It was a note, cleared by Mr Paul Southgate, of a phone conversation with him my IFN Project Officer, Kirsty Healey:
44. South Tyneside was a borough in its own right and the smallest in the region with a distinct lack of diversity. 2 -3 years previously there had been some inter faith relations which had been started but not run by Churches Together (Mr Southgate is the Executive lead of that organisation). There had not been any recent inter faith meetings or activity from this group. Mr Southgate had said he was in the process of formulating a proposal to rekindle inter faith activity in the area. He hoped that would be ready by the end of the month. The theory was there but the practical details were not quite there.

45. The next step he'd identified was to speak, personally, to community and faith leaders and people who had previously been involved in inter faith activity in that area. This would be to find out commonalities and identify areas of shared concern. He had personally found gathering around social action initiatives or projects had worked well and he thought that this was the way forwards rather than focusing on discussion meetings. It was important to identify what the community wanted rather than proceed on the basis of what it was thought is wanted by the community.
46. At present there were two people actively interested in renewing or re-establish an inter faith initiative in the area. He had identified many churches in the area and three mosques (Yemeni, Bangladeshi and one other). There was no known Jewish community or temple and he was unsure about the position in regards to Zoroastrians or Baha'is in the area. He noted the relative ease of initially gathering together but that it can take time to establish something. However, he was confident that the [inter faith initiative], however, he is confident. He said he would keep IFN informed of developments.
47. Mr Hunter Smart commented that it was interesting that things such as this went in cycles and depended on enthusiastic movers and shakers to take things forward. There used to be reasonable inter faith activity in South Tyneside and it was hoped that Mr Southgate would be able to reinvigorate that.
48. Mr Howson commented that he had not met Mr Southgate but offered assistance from Sunderland in anyway and would be glad to do things together.
49. Mr Robertson said it was interesting to see that across the region, faiths working together were often focused on shared issues and concerns and problems rather than just because it was nice to do so. For example, Sunderland was tackling a number of issues and in Newcastle, the issues centred on the Metro and how women were treated. In South Tyneside, might it be reasonable to focus on the issues and concerns facing the people living there and in what way could the faith groups address these?
50. Mr Howson said he thought it was right that inter faith forums should respond to local needs. There would be a key, more regional, focus on the increase in poverty due to the fact that the cost of living, inflation rates and fuel rates were rising. It would be interesting to see if the inter faith community responded to that in some way and very interesting to see the development of the Poverty Hearings in Sunderland. The faith communities could respond to this issue through active listening to the community. Mr Robertson thought that would be a good methodology.
51. Mr Fanibunda said that the foodbanks were playing a great part at the moment and encouraged everybody to contribute to the foodbanks.
52. Mr Howson said he had taken a sabbatical in the summer and had gone to Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield, looking at the work of the pantry systems. He said, Liverpool had appointed a Food Officer and that appointment had led to 16 different pantry systems being set up around Liverpool. This had been really

successful and he had been impressed by what he had seen there. Similar things had been done in Manchester. He had been looking at findings new ways of replacing foodbanks. There was a huge need for foodbanks but the issues around how people feel when using foodbanks was commented on and he suggested that changing the name and the structure of them might be looked at.

53. He said that it would be good to see some of these pantry systems developed in the North East. Pantry systems function by everyone (workers and users) paying £3.00 but one gains more from it and everyone is involved and some of the stigma is removed from using the service. He wondered how faith forums might become involved and restart this work in the North East.
54. Mr Beck said that his (previous) local community, in West Norwood in Lambeth, South London, had, in addition to food banks, 'Community Shops' which was effectively a pantry system. Donations were received from local supermarkets and from brands (eg with misprinted labels) and the system was set up like a shop. A number of community leaders had reported that people thought of this system as a more dignified way of receiving help. People could go around that shop and pickup whatever they needed – or wanted - and give a contribution if they were able to.
55. Mr Howson commented that the real funding for the Pantry systems in Liverpool and Manchester had come from the football clubs. The clubs had donated three freezers to each project. However, Sunderland AFC was not in a position to do the same. Mr Robertson said there was a strong connection between Newcastle FC and Newcastle Foodbank. There was a café in Chester-le-Street Street which operated on the principles described and another in Shildon.

The Revd Chris Howson left the meeting.

Agenda item 3: News from IFN – including two local inter faith focused projects

56. Ms Kirsty Healey, IFN Project Officer, reported on two projects she was working on: an update of IFN's *Local Inter Faith Guide* and short research project looking at women's local inter faith initiatives.

The Local Inter Faith Guide

57. Ms Healey said:
 - I have been working to update The Local Inter Faith Guide, which includes lots of examples of the current work and projects of local groups, sharing best practice, tips, how things have worked, and how things perhaps could have been done differently to be more effective. The revised version will include some new resources and pointers to different areas of support for local groups. This may be helpful for those wishing to start up a local inter faith group or reinvigorate one.
 - There are sections on a range of different topics. For example on working in partnerships with local authorities and on women's inter faith initiatives (where I am also working on a separate project).

- There will be material about the impact of COVID and how different local groups have responded. For some, difficulties moving online or using online technology has had a detrimental effect on their work; for others it has brought opportunities because of the ease in connecting that the use of technology has brought, enabling them to extend their reach.
- The Inter Faith Week section is expanded with new ideas and insights into Inter Faith Group.

Women's Local Inter Faith Initiatives Research

- The second project I've been working on is research into women's local inter faith initiatives in the UK and a report on that.
- This builds on a previous report commissioned from Fatheena Mubarak-Iqbal in 2006 by IFN which looked at women's inter faith engagement in the UK. A lot has changed in the UK since then and so it was time to look at this again.
- A survey was sent out to member and non-member IFN local inter faith organisation. I have also spoken to representatives from Scotland and Wales and will do so with Northern Ireland.
- I have also carried out desk research exploring different initiatives, including women's initiatives within broader local inter faith initiatives, separate initiatives, social action initiatives which have an inter faith element, and events that are put on just for women.
- Linked to the survey, IFN held a Roundtable discussion during Inter Faith Week 2021 with different contributors from national women's inter faith bodies WIN and Nisa-Nashim and local groups. Participants were invited to share best practice and also challenges and how they have overcome those. This is being drawn on in the report too.
- The project will also feed into the update of The Local Inter Faith Guide and generally into strengthening and developing women's engagement at the local level.

58. Mr Hunter Smart thanked Ms Healey for her update. IFN resources were very good and its website was good and very accessible. He looked forward to seeing the revised The Local Inter Faith Guide and the report on women's local inter faith activity. He added that pre-COVID, there had been an inter faith group for women at Durham University, organised by the University but including women from the community. The report might be something they would be interested in.
59. Mr Fanibunda commented on the volunteering of women at his local gurdwara. They worked incredibly hard to prepare food for the community, getting up at 5am to cook and feed anybody who came to eat (of any faith or religion). People, especially from the refugee community, came to have food. This was very commendable.

IFN Impact Research

60. Mr Beck gave an update about another project of IFN which was looking at the ways IFN added value to initiatives as well as areas for improvement. This included looking at the areas of work that were most valued, as well as at areas

that IFN was not currently working in but which others would value. This was, naturally, in a context of limited resources, and any new areas of work would need to fit with IFN's aims and objects.

61. The project had three parts:
 - i. A survey to be sent to IFN bodies. (He encouraged all present to respond as it would help inform IFN's board in shaping future strategy and to communicate the value of IFN's work to funders and potential members)
 - ii. An external stakeholder engagement piece, carried out by a consultant who would engage with some non-member organisations that IFN has worked with to understand where IFN has or might add value to their work.
 - iii. An evaluation, also carried out by a consultant, of how IFN currently measures impact and how that might be improved.
62. Measuring impact, and outcome information as part of that, was something that charities were increasing their focus on. Measuring the impact of inter faith activity was, however, challenging for inter faith bodies. Neither IFN nor most of the organisations working with IFN had resources to conduct extensive longitudinal studies that could look at cumulative impact over time. It was, however, important to find ways to measure what worked well and what worked less well. This project would help IFN as an organisation, but would also help IFN to help others. Conversation with other inter faith bodies about how they measured impact would be part of that.
63. Mr Hunter Smart asked how closely IFN worked with FaithAction. During the pandemic they had done, as had IFN had, a lot of work. However, he was unsure about the partnership aspect of that work. The Government seemed to be using them a lot.
64. Mr Beck replied that IFN and FaithAction had a good working relationship and there was awareness of each other's areas of work and informal reciprocal comms to share relevant work.² FaithAction provided the secretariat for the APPG on Faith and Society which developed the Faith Covenant for faith communities and local authorities. Some of IFN's local member bodies had been involved in the take up of the Faith Covenant in their areas.
65. Mr Robertson said that he saw FaithAction as a body or movement inside of the political machine (thinking of its chair, the sources of its funding, and the location of its meetings). He had attended FaithAction meetings in the House of Commons and perhaps this gave the organisation access at that level.
66. Mr Beck said that because Faith Action provided the Secretariat to the APPG it did have access to parliamentarians. However, Faith Action was an independent

² FaithAction CEO Daniel Singleton presented at IFN's National Meeting in March 2021 on FaithAction's work in England to support actions by the UK Government on places of worship during the pandemic and faith communities during COVID-19; and the importance of faith groups and local authorities working in partnership, including the Faith Covenant.
https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/Faith_Communities_and_COVID-19_-_Learning_from_the_Journey_IFN_National_Meeting_report.pdf

charity³ and pursued its own projects which were often ones with a focus on ‘faith in the public square’.

67. Mr Robertson said that he would be interested in hearing about examples such as where Tyne and Wear CitizensUK were bringing the different faith groups together around common themes and issues (such as in Tyne and Wear) which were different from the inter faith organisations. He commented that in that context middle class males had acknowledged how much of their skills and abilities had come from the women’s groups that were behind those initiatives. There had been a shift in thinking.
68. Mr Beck said that one area of IFN’s work over the last few years, had been looking at inter faith activity outside of organisations that self-defined as ‘inter faith’. That included CitizensUK as well as relevant activity in universities led by students, chaplaincies and staff; within workplaces, hospitals and many other settings. He added that, especially in larger workplaces, more inter faith employee networks have been coming into being. He noted that there was also a network of international development NGOs [BOND] of which a number of faith-based organisations were members, such as Islamic Relief, Christian Aid and Khalsa Aid. For a time, this had had a standing forum for the faith-based member organisations which was ‘inter faith’ in practice if not in name.
69. There was room for much inter organisational learning between IFN and its members and other structures carrying out relevant work, with mutual benefit.

Agenda item 4: Working in partnership for the common good

70. Mr Beck introduced the agenda item exploring partnerships between local inter faith groups and other bodies. He said some, for example, worked with local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, NHS Trusts, police, fire services and universities and colleges in their area. He invited participants to share their experiences.
71. Mr Fanibunda said:
 - Religious leaders’ activities changed during COVID to focus on such needs responding to the needs of people who are depressed, have poor mental health, those suffering from long-COVID, and those suffering from poverty. The faith groups have a lot to do there. The objectives are changing.
72. Mr Hunter Smart said:
 - Up until now, public bodies’ interest in faith communities has often been limited to ‘tick-box’ consultation about policies or strategies with diversity requirements in mind. One of the positive things COVID has done, is make public bodies recognise the value of faith communities and the contribution that they make to the local communities. Hopefully, that is something that can be built on rather than just forgotten about and as a result of this shift there can be more positive working – together.

³ The charity Lifeline.

73. Ms Mace said:
- I chair both the Middlesborough Interfaith Network and the Migration Multi-Agency Meeting so any information each holds is automatically shared with the other. That has been found to be really useful.
 - I am also participating in a piece of research on mental health provision for refugee and asylum-seeking children. We have found that one of the really big barriers to partnership working is lack of contextual knowledge.
 - So at MIFN, members set a theme for a meeting to discuss and I organise organisations or individuals to do presentations to increase contextual knowledge. We have had migration partnership and domestic violence as themes and next month we will be discussing reducing reoffending. By having different topics of interest and simply knowing who is out there and what they do, you can achieve greater outcomes and working partnerships.
74. Mr Robertson commented that the term 'the common good' was vague and it was not necessarily the case that faiths moved to address together relevant issues. For example in Newcastle that week those that lived in social housing would be about £3.20 less well-off because of the increase of rent. Given the poverty in the area, an increase of 4% was huge. He did not have any sense that, collectively, the faith groups in Newcastle would get together to discuss this with the council. He continued that there were reports of the 20 billionaires in UK having increased their profits by 10% in the last year. In that context, where/what was the common good and what would faith groups do to address this or discuss this? Where do we come together on these issues? Faith Action have provided some pointed evidence on this topic.
75. Mr Beck said that the question of what the common good means in reality would always be contested. Different religious, but also political or ideological perspectives, would shape ideas of what a good society might look like. The term was used in the title of the meeting in a broad way, giving room both to comment on the nature of the common good and also whether groups were working with other bodies in partnership to achieve that. That nature of partnership would look different from area to area.
76. Mr Robertson said that an example of a common good objective might be the closing down of all foodbanks. Pantries and that sort of new thinking was part of working towards that goal. Being involved in that helped people think about the common good. As things accumulate in the North East it is difficult to know where things will go.
77. Mr Beck asked if any local inter faith group had had financial support as a result (now or previously) of partnership working.
78. Mr Hunter Smart said CDFN had not. He added that partnerships had been focused on building relationships between individuals rather than issues based. That was not to say there was not potential for that but it had not been done thus far.
79. Mr Robertson added that he thought that faith groups had enjoyed some resources through the Area Action Partnerships.

80. Mr Hunter Smart replied that certainly a number of Christian organisations had developed projects in their local areas and had received quite a bit of funding, particularly over the last 2 years. This was partly why they had been recognised as having made a positive contribution. Statistics were not available on other faiths. Faith groups tended to just 'get on with it' because that was what they had always done rather than shouting about their work. The work that he and Jim Robertson did was in part about raising their profile.
81. Mr Robertson said that a senior officer had called the contribution of faith groups a 'revelation'. This demonstrated a level of appreciation and understanding that it was encouraging to have heard.
82. Mr Hunter Smart asked Mr Beck if IFN knew if places that had signed up to the Faith Covenant had seen any difference. He said he had joined this meeting late because he had had to give a presentation about the Armed Forces Covenant. The new Armed Forces Act included a statutory duty to pay due regard to that covenant. The Faith Covenant did not seem to have the same kind of momentum at the moment and he wondered if it ever would. He asked Mr Beck if there was any feedback from areas which had signed up and any differences that this had made.
83. Mr Beck said that in Greater London, for example, the London Borough of Barnet the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Borough had agreed a Faith Covenant a few years ago and the local inter faith groups seemed to have found a number of benefits. The support received from Faith Action in setting up the Faith Covenant had been helpful.
84. The Barnet group had, through it, seemed to create better links with the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority. In that instance, the Faith Covenant seemed to have helped them access other projects or to be able to partner on projects which went beyond the borough they were focused on. For example, there was a big push from the Mayor of London's office for planting trees, linked to concerns about the health impacts of pollution as well as climate change, and the Mayor had secured funding to plant about 1 million trees across the capital. The local authority and the local inter faith group were able to jointly put in a bid to access the trees that had been funded and then to work together to find land suitable to plant the trees on. Funding for the trees had come from the Greater London Authority, the permission for the land came from the local authority and the volunteers to plant then had come from the local inter faith group. He added that IFN knew a lot about the Barnet group because a member of the local inter faith organisation was also a current Trustee of IFN.

Agenda Item 5: Final reflections

85. Mr Robertson said that meetings like the present one and the last one held by IFN were useful. It gave an opportunity for an annual review. He expressed disappointment that more people from the local inter faith organisations of the region had not attended. He hoped that next year two or three people could have

a discussion with IFN in advance to discuss the best way to involve people and for them to turn up with prepared material.

86. Mr Beck said that this kind offer could be explored. He added that if there were any topics that attendees would particularly like to see reflected in the Agenda for the next meeting, attendees could email these to the IFN office when the note of the meeting was circulated, or at a later date, if there were region-specific issues or themes. While it could not be guaranteed that everything could be included, IFN always aimed to make the meetings as useful as possible to local groups.
87. Mr Hunter Smart said that he was keen to receive the note of the meeting as he would like to share the proceedings with his faith network and with others who had not been able to attend. Mr Beck confirmed that a draft note would come around for clearance and agreement before it was published online.
88. Mr Fanibunda said he had enjoyed the meeting and thanked IFN for arranging the link meeting as otherwise he would not have known what was happening across other areas of the region. Ms Mace agreed.

Close of meeting

89. Mr Beck thanked the attendees and closed the meeting.

29 March 2022