Leeds City Council External Placement Report

Introduction

In this report I will focus on the external placement taken with Leeds City Council over the past academic year. An overview of the placement itself and its aims will be given whilst the main focus of the report will be reflective. The placement was centred on a recommendation given to Leeds City Council to improve and clarify engagement with religious groups. This resulted in the development and launch of a document outlining mutual commitments between the council and religious groups. Both through my experience in the placement and through academic literature I have been aware of the benefits but also potential concerns when a local authority engages with religious groups. The main theme of this report will therefore be a discussion of religious representation when engaging with local authorities and the associated difficulties. To support this I will review the key literature used, some of which outlines the general advantages and drawbacks when local authorities work with faith groups and some which specifically address topic of representation. In the discussion I will introduce the question of representation and question if and how authenticity in faith representatives can be ascertained. This will be linked to the signees of the covenant and members of the forthcoming working group and in relation to which faith groups’ voice or beliefs they represent. Inter- and intra-faith diversity along with the sheer number of faith groups will be suggested as barriers to representation, along with difficulties in getting feedback from respective communities. I will consider the use of an inter-faith forum as the key mediator for launching the covenant in Leeds, for which similar problems of representation may apply. Some academic recommendations for ensuring authentic representation along with my own experience of practicalities in engagement will be combined to address this issue. I will argue that whilst comprehensive and accurate representation of all faith groups and denominations may be too idealistic, engaging with diverse inter-faith groups can be a good starting point, along with avoiding generalising or assumptive claims about who representative speak for. Finally I will give some future recommendations for the continuation of the covenant, particularly with reference to the problems surrounding representation and the need for it to be an active document.

Aims and overview of placement

The placement I undertook at Leeds City Council was based on a report written in 2013, “Taking Religion or Belief Seriously: the challenge for Leeds City Council” (Lindsay et al.). One of the recommendations for the council in the report was:
[P]ublication of a clear strategy for engagement with religious and non-religious communities which outlines the parameters and limits of engagement and [...] a series of fixed principles by which the council operates. This would include clarifying the line between religious engagement and the promotion of religious beliefs, and making clear that religious engagement can never be an ‘end in itself’ for Leeds City Council but only a means of improving its practices and services; (Lindsay et al, 2013, p. 5)

This was supported by a template developed by Faith Action as the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society; a covenant for engagement. This could be adopted by local authorities wishing to have guidelines on how better to engage with religious groups and would require commitments both from them and religious groups. My role was therefore to help adapt this covenant for Leeds City Council, engage religious groups and officially launch it in Leeds.

Initially it was decided we would work on the covenant with the Leeds Faiths Forum, with the view that they would be a good gateway to other faith groups which the covenant could be expanded to after the launch. The first stage was meeting with the Chair of Leeds Faiths Forum for support and to adapt the covenant of engagement for Leeds. Following this, approval was received from councillors to process what was now the “Covenant for Engagement between Leeds City Council and Religion or Belief Organisations” (see appendix) through the council’s executive board as an official document. The launch involved councillors from Leeds, religious representatives from the Leeds Faiths Forum, Faith Action representatives and an official signing of the covenant.

In order to continue and widen the covenant, a working group has now been set up to discuss and review the covenant regularly. The initial stages will involve discussing how best to approach other religious groups within the city to sign up to the covenant and how to spread this positive engagement with religion across council services. The group will also discuss how to share learning opportunities to improve religious and policy literacy and examples of areas where engagement is already successful. Equally there will be clarifications around funding for religious groups and identification of how to work with diverse religious groups for future engagement and consultation.

**Literature Review**
In this section I will give an overview of the literature relevant to the main theme of the report – religious representation - and the placement. To give an overview of the religious engagement with local authorities and the potential benefits and issues, I refer to three reports which provide research and analysis on this topic. In her report “Religion or Belief: Identifying Issues and Priorities”, Linda Woodhead carried out seminars with representatives and experts from religious, academic and policy backgrounds. The research identified many positive aspects of engaging with religion including social cohesion and bonding communities. Potential problems were also outlined including difficulties in reaching minority religions, differing organisational structures and values, and the question of authentic representation of religions in a policy context. Building on this theme, “Faith in the Community” by Christians in Parliament, used a survey responded to by 155 local authorities to assess their engagement with faith groups. This report also overviewed the advantages of working with faith groups, for example knowledge of local needs due to their often grassroots position, trust and social connections. Equally, the possible barriers were outlined many which overlap with Woodhead’s report. The number and diversity of faith groups presented a challenge for engagement, along with difficulties in the council and religious groups’ mutual understanding due of lack of either religious or policy literacy, respectively.

Rachael Chapman’s “Faith and Belief in Partnership” also used case studies of four local authorities to assess engagement with religious groups, resulting in similar advantages and limitations; faith groups’ community links, resources and holistic approach along with possible value-based conflicts and difficulties in genuine representation. She particularly recommends local authorities to support interfaith organisations, develop strategies for engagement and build good relationships with faith groups in order that dialogue can continue when tensions may arise. One of the key issues she focuses on is representation of faith groups and gives features of an ideal representative whilst recognising limitations. This theme was also drawn upon in another, earlier paper by Chapman and Lowndes, “Authorisation, Accountability and Authenticity: Faith Representation in Urban Governance”. The focus here is more on how to ensure the authenticity of faith representatives who are engaging with local authorities and questioning what exactly they should be representing. They suggest that representation entails being embedded and well networked in a community whilst questioning the form and availability of feedback from religious groups to representatives.

Continuing the issue of representation, Dinham and Lowndes in “Religion, Resources and Representation”, look at the tensions between policy and religious narratives which
leads them to address representation in engagement. They also suggest that getting feedback from religious groups to the representative can be a problem and propose that local authorities may assume too linear relations in faith groups, linking back to the aforementioned conflicts in organisational structures. They propose the need for multiple levels of dialogue with varying representatives to counter this. Representation is also debated in the chapter “How Participation Changes Things: inter-faith, multi-faith and a new public imaginary” by Paul Weller. This links into the issues of representation discussed in the other texts but focuses more specifically on engagement with inter-faith groups. The likely advantages of these groups are explained; their wider networks and ability to involve more faiths which may otherwise be missed out. However, parallel concerns of representation are presented in relation to which faiths may or may not be involved, who leads these groups, and how internal representatives are chosen.

Discussion

Having given an overview of key literature in the previous section I will now discuss the main theme of representation, drawing on both these texts and my experience during the placement. Leeds Faiths Forum was chosen as the main point of contact and representative for religious groups in developing and launching the covenant. At the launch there were representatives from different religious groups, but all part of Leeds Faiths Forum, signing the covenant. This brought to light the question of representation; who these signees spoke for and if their representation was authentic. This could be applied to both the individual faith representatives and the Leeds Faiths Forum as a whole due to the diversity and volume of faith groups in Leeds. Starting with an examination of the general benefits and drawbacks of engaging with faith groups, I will move on to focus on representation specifically in relation to the signing of the covenant and its working group.

There are many benefits to local authorities engaging with religious groups outlined in research reports on the subject but also apparent through the development of the covenant in Leeds. The key advantages include the positioning of faith groups within communities, often allowing for unique understanding of their needs, their ability to voice alternative, and often more holistic views and the cohesion or bonding that faith groups can invoke (Woodhead, 2009, p.4; Christians in Parliament, 2013, p.41). Lindsay et al. (2013, p.4) found that whilst Leeds City Council do have a history of working with religious groups, there continues to be some resistance within the council and the “full potential” of religious involvement has not yet been realised. Engaging with religious groups can help the council
on various levels; improving religious literacy, providing a consultative voice to public services, and cultivating relationships so that dialogue with religious communities can continue. By developing clear guidelines for engagement through the covenant, the tensions or reluctance around working with religious groups should be somewhat reduced; clearer guidelines mean that the purposes and means for engagement are clear and controlled, so will be easier to manage and be more mutually beneficial.

Having outlined the some of the advantages of working with religious groups, it must be acknowledged that even with a clear set of guidelines in the covenant, some difficulties may persist. The primary issue that arises is the representation of religious groups. At the official signing there were representatives signing on behalf of different faith groups within the city including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and latterly Sikhism and Buddhism. Immediately, it is appropriate to question who exactly is being represented here, as intra-religious and denominational diversities suggest it would be impossible for these to be comprehensively representative. Chapman (2012, p.30) suggests that when working with, or trying to find faith representatives the diversity and volume of religious groups is the key barrier. This is particularly pertinent in a city like Leeds, with high levels of religious diversity (Lindsay et al. 2013, p. 15). Problems then arise around both the question of whether diverse religious groups can be accurately represented and which religious groups are actually being represented.

In a study of local authorities, Chapman (2012, p.8) identified representation as one of the key difficulties in engaging with faith groups. She suggests that some groups are may be underrepresented or overlooked altogether which could lead to a merely “tokenistic” representation of faith (Chapman 2012, p.30). This highlights the fact that no assumptions can be made when engaging with faith representatives about whom they speak for. In doing so, the views of faith groups are homogenised and over-simplified meaning that engagement is perfunctory, benefiting neither faith groups in the community nor the council’s relationship with them. However, if we are too cynical about the possibility of genuine representation, the legitimacy of engaging with faith groups would have to be questioned. If representatives of faith groups cannot be seen as authentically representative then the potential benefits for the local authority and the community would not exist. Clearly a balance needs to be struck in finding representatives for a diverse range of faiths whilst recognising their limitations.

Christians in Parliament (2013, p. 34) identified organisational structures of faith groups and local authorities’ lack of understanding of these as a potential barrier. The differing organisational structures between faith groups and Leeds City Council therefore, could be a
contributing factor to assumptions about representation. Dinham and Lowndes (2008, p.831) build on this in their discussion of the differences between policy and religious narratives. Here a policy narrative tends to assume that religious groups follow a similar, linear organisational structure where leaders are well-connected and receive feedback from the community. A religious narrative recognises them more as networks of activities than structured organisations, and does not assume connections or feedback are simple to achieve. Thinking about the organisational structure of faith groups from a policy narrative leads to assuming that leaders are representative of a whole community. Leading on from this, it is suggested that local authorities tend to work more with larger, more established faith groups whose organisational structures are similar as they are easier to contact and connect with (Christians in Parliament, 2013, p.33; Woodhead, 2009, p.24). This presents another dimension to representation; that minority or smaller faith groups may be underrepresented. At the signing of the covenant at Leeds City Council it would appear that this was the case, as only representatives from six religions were present, who were mostly part of relatively large groups within their respective religion.

So far it appears that there are several issues with the representation of religion in relation to the Covenant of Engagement. Despite this, there are more positive approaches which suggest authentic representation of religious groups can be achieved alongside their diversity. Chapman and Lowndes (2009, p.375) identify some key characteristics which should be looked for in a religious representative; “embeddedness” in the community or religious group, to not be directly affiliated with the local authority, and to be involved in a range of faith and ideally interfaith networks. In the case of the covenant, the Leeds Faiths Forum has been our main point of contact and this is a key way in which representation has been, and can continue to be addressed. By working with an inter-faith forum initially, some of the problems with lack of, or limited representation may be tackled. As mentioned before, some religious groups may not be represented due to assumptions about how faith groups are organised on the council’s part and the fact that larger faith groups may be easier to reach out to. Equally, Leeds City Council cannot engage with an entire community or faith group simultaneously but must find representatives with whom to have a relationship, the results of which can then reach communities (Weller, 2009, p.75). Inter-faith networks are proposed as a good way for local authorities to begin engaging with faith groups, where necessary religious literacy or understanding of religious groups’ structure may be lacking on the council side (Weller, 2009, p.76). The Leeds Faiths Forum has an established network of faith groups, faith representatives and the necessary religious literacy to foster relationships with religious groups, things which it may be difficult for Leeds City Council to establish as effectively. Although the launch may have been a limited number of representatives from
larger faith groups, their involvement in an inter-faith forum seems positive for representation.

However, similar questions around the issue of representation may arise when working with Leeds Faiths Forum. Weller (2009, p.77) suggests that the position and connections of the inter-faith forum within communities must be addressed along with who is included and from which groups. How can it be ascertained that Leeds City Council’s future engagement with Leeds Faiths Forum is authentic and accountable to faith groups in Leeds and actually leads to positive results? As it has been suggested when local authorities work with faith groups, it may be more established or larger groups which have the capacity to provide representative members to an inter-faith forum. Some smaller faith groups may continue to be overlooked due to the fact that they do not have the necessary resources or structures to work with inter-faith forums or local authorities. Furthermore, the members of Leeds Faiths Forum and religious representatives in general tend not to be young people or women (Weller, 2009, p.78). This is links back to the fact that many leaders within religious groups are neither young nor women, and it is leaders who often take representative roles or inter-faith positions. This does not necessarily mean that the views of women will not be represented through the covenant as representatives may have connections with women’s or youth groups within their organisation, but it does mean that their views are underrepresented. I will come back to this issue in the next section, but perhaps as the discussions and actions around the covenant take place, involving women and young people could be addressed.

Despite these factors, what Leeds Faiths Forum can provide is the aforementioned religious literacy, connections to faith groups or representatives and what Chapman (2012, p.31) describes as a “faith […] perspective”. This is not to homogenise the values and beliefs of all religious groups in Leeds, but to suggest that although comprehensive representation may not be possible, successful engagement between faith groups and Leeds City Council can have a starting point in working with Leeds Faiths Forum. As mentioned before, an inter-faith forum will have better religious literacy and understanding of how to engage with religious groups. Leeds Faiths Forum can be representative of some faith groups in Leeds through its members but can also help through the next steps of the covenant by providing an alternative perspective and understanding of how best to engage with diverse religious groups. The inter-faith forum is able to identify factors which faith groups may look for when Leeds City Council wants to engage with them and can identify potential barriers which may need to be overcome in order to improve engagement including organisational structure, a need for policy literacy and more positive outlook on religion across council services. In this way they are not representing every belief or value from every religious group within the city
but are providing an important perspective which the council can work with to improve engagement.

**Suggestions for the future**

Having discussed the issue of representation of religion in the covenant, I will now discuss what the future of it may entail and give some recommendations in relation to the theme of representation. Mainly working with Leeds Faiths Forum in the initial stages of the covenant should help avoid some of the problems of representation by providing an established network of faith groups and an understanding of the potential needs of faith groups when engaging with the council. To ensure that this continues and expands to other faith groups the aims of the covenant and of the working group must be clear, manageable and identifiable through results.

Initially, it seems that the most important factor is to for the covenant to provide a space for sharing learning opportunities. Leeds City Council and its services will then become more religiously literate and have a better understanding of how and why religious groups work. Equally religious groups and representatives can improve their understanding of how the council works and how to engage, meaning their voice is more likely to be consulted. Sharing these learning opportunities may present difficulties around funding, resources or organisation, but it is important that they happen in order to build relationships and engagement. Clear benefits for the council and its provision of services and for religious groups and their local communities need to be set out in order to encourage learning opportunities to happen.

Linking back to representation, particularly in relation to women and young people, perhaps this underrepresentation is something that the covenant could improve. By at least starting to engage more with religious groups through Leeds Faiths Forum, areas where women and young people in religious groups are underrepresented can be identified. It is not necessarily the case that more young or female representatives must come forward, but that the council needs to understand how to reach out and engage with different members of religious communities, not just leaders. I think that this can be helped through the aforementioned learning opportunities and through having a point of contact and religious literacy in Leeds Faiths Forum to help better understand how to go about engagement for diverse communities.
Finally it is important that the covenant develops into an active agreement. This is to say that it affects the people within religious groups and within the council’s services, rather than just being a series of higher level discussions. This can be ensured in part by identifying in the working group how to engage with religious groups in a way that will benefit the individual members, rather than taking a purely top-down approach. Equally it needs to be clear what Leeds City Council wants to gain from working with religious groups; engagement needs to be seen as an active way to respond to the voices of religious groups, not as a fulfilment of policy or instrumental use of resources. If religious groups see that Leeds City Council is taking this open, positive, approach with tangible benefits they are more likely to engage. In making the covenant an active set of commitments, examples where the council or service providers are already engaging with religious groups need to be shared and continue to be shared both through meetings of the working group but also to the wider communities. These positive examples can be motivators for building relationships and also a model to understand how best to work with religious groups.

Conclusion

To conclude, this placement has allowed me the opportunity to apply skills and knowledge acquired throughout my degree so far to a working context. Through working with Leeds City Council I have developed a better understanding both of how the certain aspects of how the council operates but have also been able to contextualise my work in theology and religious studies. The development of the covenant for engagement in Leeds has been with the aim to improve the council’s engagement with religious groups in the city through outlining mutual commitments. Although the placement involved working on the covenant in its initial stages and the launch, the real effects of this new commitment will come in the meetings of the working group and the fulfilment of its aims. However the work on the covenant allowed for reflection from a religious studies perspective on the benefits and drawbacks to engaging with religions. Through reflecting on the issue of representation in particular I was able to see the advantages to working with the Leeds Faiths Forum, but also the caution that must be taken around making assumptions of representation. The issues that came up were that of smaller faith groups being overlooked, underrepresentation of women and young people and expectations about authentic representation. These was seen to be due to various factors; assumptions about the organisation of religious groups, inter- and intra-religious diversity and a lack of either policy or religious literacy on both sides. However by working with Leeds Faiths Forum in the development and launch of the covenant I think that the representation can be addressed through the religious understanding and perspective they
provide, along with a network of faith groups. Looking to the future, if the working group can ensure that recommended actions are taken, such as learning opportunities, sharing examples and discussing how best to engage, the covenant should be beneficial both to Leeds City Council and religious groups.

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**Bibliography**


Appendix: Covenant for Engagement

Covenant for Engagement between Leeds City Council and Religion or Belief Organisations

The coming decade will see the country facing new social needs and tough new challenges. There will be fresh demands on public health, social care, education, employment support and community inclusion.

These challenges will require the identification of a new set of resources. We will need to unlock the potential of every part of our society to contribute together towards solutions.

We believe that one important resource can be realised by supporting faith-based organisations to work constructively and effectively, as part of civil society, with local authorities. That will mean ensuring that local authorities are confident in commissioning services from and transferring assets to appropriately qualified faith-based organisations, and that they include faith groups when they look for solutions to social needs.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society is convinced that faith groups have a great deal to offer as providers and advocates for the communities in which they serve, and that some of their potential is being unnecessarily overlooked at present. To help tackle the problem, the Group has drafted a Covenant which has been amended and adopted by Leeds City Council and local faith groups.

The Covenant

The Covenant is a joint commitment between faith communities and local authorities to a set of principles that guide engagement, aiming to remove some of the mistrust that arises due to a lack of mutual understanding, and to promote open, practical working on all levels.

Our aim is that Leeds City Council and faith communities should work together to achieve the following commitments on the basis of the priorities and needs of all communities.

The Covenant is built on the following principles:

- Faith communities are free to practise their beliefs and religious observances without restriction, and to raise their voice in public debate and to be respected, within the framework of UK law.
Public services and faith based social action should respect service users from all backgrounds, with no discrimination on the grounds of religion, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation or disability.

The voice, participation and solutions that faith communities bring are important, and consultation should enable them to be brought to bear for the benefit of the wider community.

Faith organisations and services are encouraged to work not only with the council but with local businesses, education providers and health and other publicly funded services in order to empower communities; monopolies of funding, action and participation can be damaging.

The Covenant entails the following commitments:

**Leeds City Council** commits to welcome the involvement of faith groups in the delivery of services and social action on an equal basis with other groups. In addition, they commit to:

- Building relationships and trust with faith groups in particular through Leeds Faith Forum;
- Adopting strategies for the engagement of faith communities in consultation exercises, in particular through Leeds City Council’s Religion or Belief Hub and Citizens Panel;
- Encouraging faith groups and their members to be involved in the reshaping and redesign of city services in line with the aspirations and vision we all have for Leeds;
- Establishing clear guidelines around funding;
- Developing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the local authority.

**Faith based organisations** commit to work actively with Leeds City Council in the design and delivery of services to the public. In addition, they commit to:

- Seeking opportunities to bring people together to serve the community, particularly its poorest and most isolated members;
- Serving equally all local residents seeking to access the public services they offer, without proselytising, irrespective of their religion, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation or disability;
- Using resources provided for delivering a service wholly for that purpose, and not for any other;
- Ensuring excellence in the safeguarding of adults and children, health & safety, accountability and transparency in decision making;
- Responding to consultations where appropriate;
- Developing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the local authority.

The Covenant will be supported and delivered by:
A partnership between Leeds City Council Communities Team and Leeds Faiths Forum.

The Covenant will be open to all faith based organisations within the city and supported by all Leeds City Council services.

Administrative support will be provided by Officers within the Leeds City Council Communities Team.

A Working Group will be established to monitor the promotion and roll out across faith based organisations. The Working Group will review the Covenant on a bi-annual basis.

The Working Group will focus on:

- Sharing examples of work already being undertaken, in particular best practice
- Ensure the Council and the Religion or Belief sector share learning and development opportunities where possible.
- Provide clarity around the availability of support and funding from the Council and Third Sector.
- Ensure the Religion or Belief sector take part fully in city wide and local community consultations to inform the delivery of public services.