

# Taking Religion and Belief Seriously: The Challenge for Leeds City Council

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## Part One: Taking Religion and Belief Seriously: An Introduction and Summary

This report has been produced by Jane Lindsay, Caroline Starkey and Ben Kirby at the Centre for Religion and Public Life at the University of Leeds.

It was commissioned by Leeds City Council in response to the findings of a research project entitled 'Religion and the Big Society in Leeds'. This project investigated the impact that the 'Big Society' agenda is having on religious organisations, the services that they provide and the communities that they support.

The project identified a number of key challenges for the Local Authority in engaging with religious communities, organisations and dynamics. These included institutional cultural resistance to religious engagement and tensions emerging within the 'equalities agenda'. The detailed findings of this project can be found in Part Two.

This report draws from data gathered from interviews undertaken toward the 'Religion and Big Society in Leeds' project and from a later focus group with core members of the Leeds City Council 'Religion or Belief Hub'.

It is intended to inform Local Authority elected members and officers about the challenges they face given the changing state-civil society landscape. It offers practical solutions for the effective development of local policy and practice with due regard for religion and belief.

While this report suggests that 'taking religion and belief seriously' should be a priority for Leeds City Council, attention paid to religion should not be disproportionate, should not compromise the impartiality of the Local Authority, nor should it be done at the expense of consultation with other interest-groups, including formal -and informal- non-religious communities.

### Why now?

This report follows up the findings of the 'Religion and the Big Society' project. It focuses specifically on the challenges faced by the Local Authority in an era which has been described as 'post-secular'<sup>1</sup> and in which interest in 'religion' is increasing even in sectors that have traditionally marginalized or ignored it.

It represents a response to the demands of a national Government which has placed considerable emphasis on the positive contribution of religion to public life. Yet it also

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<sup>1</sup> It has become increasingly common for academics and policy makers to refer to the current era as 'post-secular'. This expression has a number of - often related - meanings (as described by Beckford 2012) but generally describes a global context in which the theory that social modernization inevitably leads to secularization -has been brought into question. This report acknowledges the short-hand use of 'post-secular' to describe a local, national and international context in which religion is increasingly visible in public life but takes no position on whether or not this is an accurate description of religious change in the contemporary world.



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reflects a longer-term and less contingent set of circumstances which suggest that ‘taking religion and belief seriously’ is more than a passing fad.

These include a prolonged period of austerity marked by declining public sector budgets; the closure of regional Government offices, such as Yorkshire Forward, which had the capacity to engage more closely with different communities; a long-term re-orientation of public services toward the achievement and measurement of outcomes; the marketization of service delivery and emergence of the ‘faith based organisation’ as a partner for, or replacement of, state providers; comprehensive equalities legislation and high levels of religious pluralism, including significant growth in the numbers of those self-identifying as Muslim and non-religious according to census data.

### Why here?

Leeds is the third largest city in Britain with a population of 751,000 people, according to the 2011 census. It is also a highly diverse city with over 140 ethnic groups represented, and Black and Ethnic minorities constitute 17.4% of the overall population, according to the Office for National Statistics. The religious complexion of Leeds also closely reflects the national picture. This combination of factors makes Leeds an ideal case-study for examining relationships between the local authority and religious communities, as does the aspiration to be recognised as an example of national best practice.

The report argues that:

1. In light of resource constraints, central government requirements and the pluralism of the local community, as well as the capacity, contribution and resources available within religious groups, *better understanding of, and engagement with, religious communities, organisations and dynamics by Leeds City Council is imperative;*
2. However, there are currently *high levels of cultural resistance to religious engagement* among Leeds City Council officers. This cultural resistance is the result of a number of factors including fear of causing offence, a lack of religious literacy and a commitment to the ‘secularism’ of the Local Authority;
3. Although the Council has a long history of engaging with local religious communities and organisations and has developed a responsive consultation mechanism in the ‘religion or belief hub’, *the full potential for this hub has yet to be realised* and policy officers too rarely consider ‘religion and belief’ in a strategic way;
4. There is no simple solution to the range of challenges facing the Local Authority in the current era, but *there is a window of opportunity for Leeds City Council* to develop solutions and national best practice;
5. There are a number of *practical actions through which Leeds City Council could demonstrate its commitment to take religion and belief seriously*. In the short-term this means publishing and sharing examples of positive partnership between the local authority and religious groups, for example, in tackling poverty. It also means addressing head-on areas in which attentiveness to religion and belief genuinely conflicts with other policies or agendas in order to change the institutional ‘default setting’ from one in which engagement



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with religion and belief is perceived as a barrier to effective service provision to one in which the opportunities for improving service provision by engaging with religion or belief are recognised.

This report identifies a number of ways in which Leeds City Council might lead the way in deepening its engagement with religious organisations at a local level and makes a number of specific recommendations for future action. We recommend:

- \* **That a series of workshops be offered to staff across Leeds City Council to increase attentiveness to religious communities and dynamics by challenging common myths about ‘doing religion’ expressed by council employees;**
- \* **A detailed audit (sponsored by the Chief Executive) of existing Leeds City Council engagements (formal and informal) with religious (and formal ‘non religious’) groups to help identify common patterns of engagement and develop metrics for measuring effectiveness, and this should include the work undertaken within the field of Public Health at local level;**
- \* **Leeds City Council, in conjunction with the Centre for Religion and Public Life, host a national conference to share experience and best practice; promote religious literacy and develop models for the engagement of religious and non-religious groups in public service delivery. This conference will provide an opportunity to showcase Leeds as the ‘Best City’ for religion and belief in which Local Authority practice is joined up, and works successfully in partnership with religious and non-religious communities to maximise outcomes and work in the interests of local people.**
- \* **The identification of a senior council officer within each directorate with designated responsibility for engagement with the equalities hubs at every stage of policy development and delivery.**
- \* **The publication of a clear strategy for engagement with religious and non-religious communities which outlines the parameters and limits of engagement and which sets out 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;**
- \* **In support of this strategy, we recommend the updating of religious literacy guidance formerly published by Yorkshire and Humber<sup>2</sup> (2002) and the development of an online tool to assist council employees in being attentive to religion in their day-to-day operations. This should highlight to officers the complexity within and between religious communities and organisations, and offer a simple set of principles by which to engage and understand dynamics, for example via model ‘case studies’ for religious engagement in:**
  - a) **Policy development and consultation (for example on Saturday parking arrangements in the City Centre or improving access to smoking cessation services)**

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<sup>2</sup> Original publication can be found here:  
<http://www.yhassembly.gov.uk/dnlds/Religious%20literacy%204th%20ed.pdf>



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- b) **Delivery of services (for example, the provision of adult social care for members of religious communities)**
- c) **Commissioning or partnering with religious organisations (for example, arrangements for the transfer of a library from Leeds City Council to a religious organisation).**

This report contains three substantive sections:

The first explores the background and context to this report, including a rationale for the need for attention to religion within the policy, scholarly and national contexts. The second presents an analysis of key findings from the recent research undertaken by the Centre for Religion and Public Life in Leeds.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we present an analysis of the existing structures for engaging religious organisations, communities and dynamics.

Throughout these sections, we indicate key recommendations based on evidence drawn from our research in Leeds, as well as from the wider academic and policy literature. A detailed presentation of the relevant literature is available in Annex A. In Annex B, we present a timeline of Leeds City Council's engagement with 'religion', and in Annex C, we include a summary of 'key actors and organisations', each of which provide relevant context and background information for this report.

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<sup>3</sup> Information about the Centre for Religion and Public Life can be found in the next part of this report, and also on the Centre website: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125010/>



## **The Centre for Religion and Public Life, University of Leeds**

The Centre for Religion and Public Life is situated within the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science at the University of Leeds.

The aim of the Centre is to foster research into the immensely important, and increasingly contentious, role of religion in public life in the world today, and to provide a forum in which contemporary research and scholarship can be debated and disseminated.

As the focus for an academic community at the forefront of current research into the nature and role of Christianity, Islam and African and Indian religions in society, politics and culture, the Centre brings together a group of scholars seeking to overturn the neglect or marginalisation of religious factors in many academic and popular debates about public life.

The Centre's interdisciplinary character, signaled by the theological, sociological, anthropological and historical interests of its participants, make it a unique forum for the study of contemporary religion, while its promotion of research into issues such as globalisation, violence, ethics, technology, development studies, ecology, diaspora, race and ethnicity mean it is uniquely placed to make a substantive contribution to serious consideration of some of the most pressing intellectual and practical challenges facing the world today.

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## Part Two: Background and Context

This report about Leeds City Council's relationship with religious communities has been prepared in a context where considerable academic and policy attention is being paid to religion. In this section, we identify and discuss *three key drivers* of this increased attention to religion: a *policy context* in which religious organisations and communities are implicated in an increasing range of spheres and in which the 'secularism' of the public sector is being challenged; a *scholarly context* which documents the global 'resurgence of religion' and which characterises the current era as 'post-secular'; and a *national and regional context* in which the mobilisation of religious communities and organisations is both visible, and challenging of the status quo.

A detailed review of relevant literature can be found at Annex A. What follows represents a summary of key themes which are pertinent to the specific context of Leeds City Council's engagement with religious organisations and communities.

### 2.1 Policy context

The Coalition Government has publicly encouraged engagement with religious organisations and communities at local, national and international levels. Ministerial rhetoric emphasises not only the continued significance of religion in contemporary society but seeks to actively engage with religious communities and dynamics in the achievement of public policy goals.<sup>4</sup> In the last three years, the Coalition Government has taken a variety of steps to respond to criticism about the way religious engagement was undertaken by its predecessors.

1. In June 2011, counter-radicalisation policy 'Prevent' (HMG, 2011) was refocused around known targets and removed from association with integration work.<sup>5</sup>
2. The 'Near Neighbours' programme, launched by Communities Secretary Eric Pickles in November 2011, aims to increase interfaith and intercultural cooperation in improving local neighbourhoods. Administered through the Church Urban Fund, this programme explicitly places a strong emphasis on the 'vital role' played by faith groups in local communities.<sup>6</sup>
3. The conviction that religion plays an important role in society was further underlined by the publication of 'Faith Partnership Principles'

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, celebrated the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible by calling Britain 'a Christian country' and describing the role the Bible has played in helping 'to give Britain a set of values and morals'. Launching the 'Near Neighbours' policy, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles emphasised the 'vital role' played by faith communities <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/launch-of-near-neighbours-programme> - (accessed 12 February 2013).

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-strategy-2011>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/launch-of-near-neighbours-programme> - accessed 12 February 2013



by the Department for International Development in February 2012,<sup>7</sup> which ‘marks a new era of understanding between government and faith groups on global development.’

4. Ministerial rhetoric suggests that these initiatives are part of a conscious shift toward ‘doing God’ (Pickles, 2012). On a number of occasions the UK’s Christian foundations have been reasserted<sup>8</sup> and historic policies of multiculturalism criticised.<sup>9</sup>
5. In December 2013, the Prime Minister intervened over the decision by Universities UK to allow segregation of men and women where requested by visiting Islamic speakers, highlighting potential tensions between public sector religious engagement and equalities. After Education Secretary Michael Gove accused Universities UK of ‘pandering to extremism’, a Downing Street spokesman made clear that ‘guest speakers should not be allowed to address segregated audiences’, setting a potential precedent for the limits of religious engagement.<sup>10</sup>
6. The so-called ‘Big Society’ agenda envisages a significant role for religious organisations in the delivery of services, in building social capital and in community integration.

*An increasingly broad range of policy implicates religious organisations, communities and dynamics* including domestic integration and the ‘Big Society’ agenda; education and welfare; justice and offender management; economics and finance; international development and stabilisation; defence, security, counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism.

This increased attention to religion has coincided with considerable *evolution in the role of both central and local government* and the relationship between them. The emphasis on localism from both the Coalition and previous New Labour Government, as well as the drive to personalise services has resulted in a shift from the public sector acting as ‘deliverers’ of services to a different model of commissioning and regulation. This has been combined with a rigorous ‘result-orientation’ of public policy and delivery in which success is measured in terms of results rather than activity.

## 2.2 Scholarly context

As a result of the so-called ‘global resurgence of religion’, a wide range of academic disciplines have turned their attention to religious communities, organisations and dynamics.

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<sup>7</sup> See DFID website <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/faith-groups-new-partnership-on-aid> accessed 6 August 2013

<sup>8</sup> On 16 December 2011, the Prime Minister called Britain ‘a Christian country.’ The following February, Baroness Warsi emphasised ‘the importance of the Established Church and our Christian heritage’ (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/baroness-warsi-speech-in-the-holy-see> - accessed 22 June 2013).

<sup>9</sup> In February 2011, the Prime Minister declared that the doctrine of ‘state multiculturalism’ which has ‘encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream’ had failed to prevent extremism. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference> - accessed 25 October 2013

<sup>10</sup> For more information about this debate, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-25365658> (accessed Dec 14 2013).



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Beckford (2012) describes a range of different ways in which the idea of ‘post-secularity’ has gripped the academy, and identifies ‘varieties’ of the post-secular in disciplines such as philosophy, literary theory, post-colonial studies, anthropology, political science, international relations and geography.

A number of common themes emerge in an increasing body of literature which is concerned with the relationship between religion and public policy. These themes primarily centre around two issues: on the one hand, there is the question of the *capacity and potential* of religious groups to achieve public policy goals; and on the other, there is the matter of *potential challenges to be overcome* in partnering with religious groups.

In the first case, there is discussion of the claims made by both ministers and religious groups themselves regarding the *wealth of resources at the disposal of religious groups*. This is both in terms of material assets (e.g. finances, equipment, buildings and property) and non-material assets (e.g. expertise and information, especially a local level). There are also various claims to the *capacity of religious groups to represent and lead communities*, and to help build community cohesion. Indeed, some want to flag up various instances in which religious groups are already serving the British public, as well as contributing to the values and identities of UK communities.

In the second case, concerning possible challenges to be overcome, there is debate about *how much to expect from religious groups*, given the need to maintain standards of service delivery, as well as where to focus partnerships (e.g. whether to pursue community-level projects or larger-scale engagement). Overlapping slightly with this, some want to highlight the *potential for conflicts of interest* and expectations about what collaboration involves. On top of this, there is a very real potential for a climate of *mutual suspicion*: for example, there may be concerns that the government is seeking to co-opt religious groups; or, from the other side, that religious groups are looking for opportunities to proselytise. From a different angle, questions about *mutual understanding* are debated, from general questions about ‘religious literacy’ on the part of the public sector, to issues regarding equalities legislation stemming from different social attitudes (e.g., gender, sexual orientation) on the part of religious groups.

### 2.3 National and regional context

A number of recent events and publications suggest the *increasing ‘muscularity’ of religious communities and organisations in Britain*. Not only have religious communities and organisations identified a variety of ways in which they already contribute to public life in the UK, but they have criticised policy makers and public sector employees as lacking ‘religious literacy’ and formal structures for religious engagement.

For example, the ‘Christians in Parliament’ have worked with the Evangelical Alliance to produce two reports advocating ‘pluralistic’, rather than ‘secular’, modes of operation and the All party parliamentary group (APPG) on Faith and Society has been established, chaired by Stephen Timms MP, which (according to Faith Action, a national charity and secretariat of the APPG) aims to ‘highlight the contribution to society by faith-based organisations, to



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identify best practice, and to promote understanding of the groups providing innovative solutions around the country.’<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the ‘non-religious’ community is being mobilised through key organisations like the Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information about the APPG and Faith Action, see: <http://www.faithaction.net/index.php?p=599>. Accessed 12/12/13.



## **Part Three: Religion and the Local Authority in Leeds: Research Project and Key Findings**

The aim of the following section is to give a short summary of the ‘Religion and Big Society in Leeds’ research project and to identify the key findings from the research. These are included in this report as they provide important context for the current challenges faced by Leeds City Council in this area and provide an evidence base, alongside the existing literature, for the recommendations that we make within this report.

### **3.1 About the Research**

From June –October 2012, The Centre for Religion and Public Life, in conjunction with Leeds City Council, undertook a research project, funded by HEIFV/Ignite,<sup>12</sup> which explored the relationship between the Local Authority and religious groups, and the issues and challenges they both faced in an era where they were increasingly likely to interact with each other.

The project took the form of 16 semi-structured interviews with the following stakeholders; Local Authority officers (from various work areas); voluntary, community and faith sector representatives; and Central Government officers. Interviews were recorded and detailed notes were taken. In addition to the research, we held a half-day workshop on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012 in order to clarify our research findings, forge collaborative links with key partners and to identify areas of future research.

In August 2013, we also conducted a follow-up focus group with core members of Leeds City Council’s ‘religion or belief hub’. Through this focus group we were able to update our information as to the status of the ‘hub’ and action taken on the issue of engagement with religion and belief by Leeds City Council and partners since the initial project was completed. The information gathered in this focus group has also contributed to the recommendations regarding ‘the hub’ that have been identified in this report.

### **3.2 Thematic Research Findings**

The findings from our research can be summarised in four, inter-related themes:

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<sup>12</sup> These were small grant funds, supported by the University of Leeds.



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1. There is a *disconnect between central government rhetoric and local government practice* in relation to increasing engagement with religious groups;
2. There are *challenges* faced by the Local Authority in negotiations between *religion and the 'equalities agenda'*;
3. There is an *absence of religiously literate language and practice* within the Local Authority;
4. There is a *tentative welcoming of Government attention* from local religious organisations and Groups, but *concerns about capacity* to deliver increasing services.

These findings were presented to the workshop, and were supported by participants in attendance. This research is currently being written into both an academic publication (for a peer-reviewed journal) and also for verbal presentation at the British Sociological Association Annual Conference in April 2014, at the University of Leeds.

### 3.3 Pertinent comments from Leeds City Council staff to underpin the themes

During the interviews, a number of Leeds City Council staff expressed some confusion, and fear, of talking about the role that religious groups might play in delivering Council objectives. Whilst we present here only a small sample of the comments collected during our interviews, they are illustrative of some of the key issues raised. For example, one officer stated;

“Council officers find religion very uncomfortable to talk about...a blanket ban is easier”.

Another explained that, in relation to engaging with ‘religion and belief’, the general approach involves speaking to one member of a religious group or community (often a ‘religious leader’) and then unquestionably taking their perspective as ‘representative’ of the whole. As a result of this, one officer felt that:

‘...as soon as someone speaks on faith we stop listening to other perspectives’.

This discomfort and concern about ‘engaging with religion’ was often attributed to a lack of guidance from the Authority about working with groups that have a defined religious affiliation. One stated that there had been “*no proactive message on religion*” from the executive despite Central Government’s increased attention to religion. Another claimed: “*there is no clear guidance....just custom and practice*” which sometimes led to confusion, and disparity between different departments and individual staff. In fact, one officer stated that;

‘...avoidance of confronting these issues is creating a parallel universe’

One of the main concerns of staff centred on a perceived lack of understanding the different religions in Leeds, and one officer claimed that the level of ‘religious literacy’ and



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knowledge amongst Council staff was “*beyond what I thought would have been the lowest level of expectation*”.

### 3.4 Summary of Undergraduate Placement Findings

The findings from this research project were mirrored by a review of religion in equality impact assessments undertaken during an undergraduate placement from Theology and Religious Studies at Leeds City Council in May 2013. This review concluded that:

- religion/belief is *not generally classed as a high priority* at the Council;
- data on religion/belief is *rarely analysed or employed effectively* – and when used is often out of date;
- there is often a *lack of public response to calls for information* on regional religion/belief demographics;
- there is a *general lack of knowledge about religion/belief* which results in stereotyping and overlooking of issues;
- there is *confusion about meanings* of terms such as 'religion', 'belief', 'race', and 'culture';
- existing resources on religion/belief are *largely unhelpful*;
- equality impact assessments are *not taking religion and belief into account*; and
- **there is insufficient knowledge and understanding** regarding matters of religion/belief.

#### **We therefore recommend:**

**\* that a series of workshops be offered to staff across Leeds City Council to increase attentiveness to religious communities and dynamics by challenging common myths about ‘doing religion’ expressed by council employees.**

**\* a detailed audit (sponsored by the Chief Executive) of existing Leeds City Council engagements (formal and informal and including those undertaken by public health) with religious (and formal ‘non religious’) groups to help identify common patterns of engagement and develop metrics for measuring effectiveness, and this should include the work undertaken within the field of Public Health at local level.**

**\* that Leeds City Council, in conjunction with the Centre for Religion and Public Life, host a national conference to share experience and best practice; promote religious literacy and develop models for the engagement of religious and non-religious groups in public service delivery. This conference will provide an opportunity to showcase Leeds as the ‘Best City’ for religion and belief in which local authority practice is joined up and works successfully in partnership with religious and non-religious communities to maximise outcomes and work in the interests of local people.**

## Part Four: Structures for the Engagement of Religious Communities, Organisations and Dynamics

4.1. The City of Leeds exhibits high levels of religious diversity. According to the 2011 census:

- \* The proportion of people who say they are Christian is lower in Leeds (55.9%) than across the whole of England and Wales (59.3%)
- \* The proportion of people who say they have no religion is higher in Leeds (28.2%) than the rest of the country (25.1%).
- \* The number of people who stated that their religion was Christian has fallen by 13 percentage points from 68.9% in 2001 to 55.9% in 2011 (the same level of decrease as for England and Wales).
- \* Compared to England and Wales, Leeds has higher than average proportions of people stating their religion as Jewish (0.9% compared to 0.5%), as Muslim (5.4% compared to 4.8%) and as Sikh (1.2% compared to 0.8%)

4.2. There are well established faith and interfaith organisations in the city and a long history of engagement between these groups and the Local Authority (see Annex B - Timeline). In recent years, the Equalities Assembly (through the 'religion or belief hub') has served as the main formal point of contact between Leeds City Council and faith communities. There has also been increasing interest shown in 'Places of Worship' from Public Health, and several initiatives to include religious communities in health promotion activities exist at locality level throughout Leeds, although at present, no overarching framework or coordinating principles exist to guide this work.

4.3. Both members of the religion or belief hub and the Council officers responsible for facilitating it suggested that it has served an important function in increasing awareness of how the Council works among different religious communities in Leeds and praised the Equalities Assembly for improving communication between the Council and its residents.

4.4. However, members reported that there have been a number of significant challenges to the effective operation of the hub. As originally envisaged, the hub was intended to operate from the grass roots with members bringing concerns and issues to the Council (e.g. problems accessing services) but it has proven difficult to find areas of common ground between the faith communities, and the hub has therefore lacked a concrete agenda. This is particularly apparent when compared to other 'hubs' (e.g. sexual orientation and disability).

4.5. With no clear agenda, members express confusion about the purpose of the hub. Perhaps as a result of this, the hub has struggled to maintain a representative membership and attendance at meetings has dwindled. The challenge of maintaining a representative membership has been augmented by the fact that many faith communities and organisations in Leeds have alternative means of accessing senior council officers or politicians and may use these to 'bypass' formal structures. The lack of a formal structure for the communication



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of these engagements within the Council means that policy and practice on religion and belief often lacks coherence.

4.6. Finally, the relationship of the hub to the 'Leeds Faiths Forum' has not always been clear. Some hub members feel that the hub replicates this existing structure for interfaith cooperation and dialogue with Government agencies.

4.7. In response to these complex challenges, the nature and functioning of the hub has changed significantly in the past year:

- \* It has become a 'virtual' rather than 'physical' forum for engagement of religious communities which is more inclusive and requires less commitment from members
- \* It is supported by quarterly meetings of all 'hub representatives' where the Council identifies key priorities and themes (e.g. the Adult Social Care project 'Better Lives')
- \* Members of the hub are invited to the Equalities Assembly annual conference where they can offer perspectives from religious communities on issues which are priorities for the Council.

4.8. These developments have radically improved both the functioning of the hub and as a result the Council's ability to undertake effective engagement with religious communities and organisations. Members report that the hub provides an 'essential' link between religious communities and Leeds City Council and were able to identify a wide range of policy areas in which consultation with faith communities had already or had potential to improve outcomes. These included health, welfare, transport, housing and social care. Yet, both hub members and Council officers express concern about the marginalisation of the hub within the Council which severely compromises its effective contribution to the development of policy and services.

**We therefore recommend the identification of a senior council officer within each directorate with designated responsibility for engagement with the equalities hubs at every stage of policy development and delivery.**

4.9. However, in continuing to engage religious communities, Leeds City Council faces a number of persistent challenges making robust and frank dialogue important. For example, it will be important to tackle head-on tensions between the Council's policies on gender and sexual orientation and those views expressed by some religious communities. The idea of 'representation' can also be problematic given it belies the diversity within and between religious communities.

**We recommend the publication of a clear strategy for engagement with religious communities which outlines the parameters and limits of engagement and which sets out a series of fixed principles by which the council operates including, for example, 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;**

**In support of this strategy, we recommend:**



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**\* the updating of religious literacy guidance formerly published by Yorkshire and Humber<sup>13</sup> and the development of an online tool to assist council employees in being attentive to religion in their day-to-day operations. This should highlight to officers the complexity within as well as between religious communities and organisations, and offer a simple set of principles by which to engage and understand dynamics, for example via model ‘case studies’<sup>14</sup> for religious engagement in;**

- a) Policy development and consultation (for example on Saturday parking arrangements in the City Centre or improving access to smoking cessation services)**
- b) Delivery of services (for example, the provision of adult social care for members of religious communities)**
- c) Commissioning or partnering with religious organisations (for example, arrangements for the transfer of a library from Leeds City Council to a religious organisation).**

**\* that this work complement, and engage directly with, the popular ‘Religion and Belief Guide’ which is currently being updated by Leeds City Council to take into account the recent census data.**

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<sup>13</sup> See the University of Leeds Community Religions Project website for a link to this work on religious literacy: [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125010/the\\_centre\\_for\\_religion\\_and\\_public\\_life/1707/community\\_religions\\_project](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125010/the_centre_for_religion_and_public_life/1707/community_religions_project)

<sup>14</sup> For example, one such ‘case study’ could be the recently compiled ‘Embedding Equality in Planning Processes’ which explored how the Equality Act ‘protected characteristics’ should be engaged with in Council planning. A document of this nature could be applied across the board in relation to ‘religion and belief’.



## Annex A: Indicative Literature Review

This review is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive but is provided to support the conclusions and recommendations found in the 'Taking Religion and Belief Seriously' report. It offers an overview narrative of the religion-public policy relationship based on an analysis of key relevant publications. Full details of referenced works can be found in the bibliography.

As **Woodhead and Catto's** (2012) recent collection of essays suggests, increasing attention has been paid to religion by the policy community over the last 10 years. **Beckford** (2010) suggests this increased visibility of religion is the result of dramatically increased religious pluralism, equalities legislation and the 'confluence of communitarian and neoliberal currents' which has created a 'faith sector' in public service delivery.

**Temple** (2000) and **McAnulla** (2010) have both described a significant shift in the role and practice of 'governance' which took place toward the end of the 20th century. Both suggest that Blair's 'third way' marked the end of ideological public policy and a new emphasis on 'result-orientation' which opened public service delivery up to an increasing range of solutions. **McAnulla** (2010:294) argues that the Coalition Government has continued this pragmatic approach, emphasising 'best practice' or 'what works' rather than the ideology of state vs. market which has resulted in a new emphasis on 'society'. Similarly, **Griggs and Sullivan** (2012:2) suggest that the Coalition Government's emphasis on 'localism' requires local government to 'resist its own 'centralizing tendencies' and devolve as much power as it can to individuals, communities and neighbourhoods.

**Chapman (2012)** proposes that faith and humanist groups can help Councils achieve their policy and social action goals and service delivery, and improve their picture of the diverse needs of their electorates. She also acknowledges that partnership can pose challenges (e.g. barriers to engagement, anxieties around proselytism and equalities), but reasons that these can be overcome through consultation. A study by **SURGE (2010)** explores what faith communities contribute to the life of the county of Oxfordshire, highlighting their importance in work with children and young people, and in motivating people to contribute more to community integration and well-being. It also highlights instances of successful engagement between faith communities and public sector agencies.

**The Christians in Parliament (working with the Evangelical Alliance)** have published two recent reports - one focusing on central government (2012) and the other on local government (2013). In both documents, the challenge of increasing 'religious literacy' in the public sector is identified and emphasis is placed on the Local Authority as the primary point of interaction between faith communities and the state and challenges Local Authorities to overcome their fear and suspicion of faith-based service providers and to 'develop plural rather than secular modes of operation'. Other religious communities have also embraced the opportunities offered in the current context. Former Chief Rabbi, **Jonathan Sacks (2011)**, suggested that the era of austerity called on religious communities by creating a gap which can only be filled by idea of 'mutual responsibility' and the **Jewish Leadership Council published a policy**



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**paper (2010)** outlining its response to the 'big society'. Concerned by the considerable attention being paid to faith communities and organisations, the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group initiated a parliamentary debate in 2013 to emphasise the the 'unrecognised' contributions that humanists and atheists make to British society.

**Dinham and Jackson (2012), Lambie-Mumford and Jarvis (2012) and Green, Barton and Johns (2012) and Jawad (2012)** all recognise the role religious groups have played in delivering public services over the last century, particularly recently, but all identify challenges for the public sector in partnering with faith-based organisations including mutual suspicion and conflicts over culture and values. **Kettell (2012)** too is sceptical about claims that religious groups have a particular capacity to deliver public services. He foresees potential conflicts of interest between certain religious groups and public service contractors and funding bodies, which may even lead to mutual alienation. Furthermore, a number of scholars, including **Prothero (2008)** and **Dinham and Jones (2010)** criticise the public sector's lack of 'religious literacy' and some go so far as to suggest that public policy has an overtly 'secular' orientation (e.g. **Chapman, 2008** and **Gutkowski, 2011**).

### Summary: Three Key Themes Emerging from the Literature

#### (i) Present context:

- **Scaling-back** of public-funded services in wake of post-2008 debt crisis;
- David Cameron's vision of a '**Big Society**' imagines gap left by such cuts can be filled by partnering with empowered civil society;
- Larger context of market-driven shift towards a '**mixed economy**' for public services has been under way since the 1980s;
- **Result:** new space has gradually opened up for contribution of religious groups in delivering public services;
- **Opportunity embraced** with both hands by some (particularly mainline Christian) groups.

#### (ii) Capacity and potential of religious groups:

- Rich in **material resources** (e.g., finances, buildings and property, equipment);
- Rich in **non-material resources** (e.g., expertise and information, especially at local level);
- Unique capacity to **represent** and **lead** communities;
- Can help build community cohesion;
- **Already contribute** to values and identities of UK communities;
- **Already involved** in serving public.

#### (iii) Potential challenges to overcome:



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- **Conflicts of interest** and expectations about what collaboration involves;
- Question of **how much to expect** from religious groups, given need to maintain standards of service delivery;
- **Mutual suspicion** (e.g., concerns that the government is seeking to co-opt religious groups, or that religious groups are looking for opportunities to proselytise);
- General question about '**religious literacy**' on the part of public sector;
- Issues regarding **equalities legislation** stemming from different social attitudes (e.g., gender, sexual orientation);
- Question of **scale**: whether to pursue larger-scale support or community-level projects.



## Annex B: Religious Engagement: a Timeline<sup>15</sup>

**1998:** University of Leeds and Leeds Church Institute publish 'Faith in our Future: People of Faith, Social Action and the City of Leeds' and establish Leeds Multi Faiths Liaison Forum (later Leeds Faiths Forum)

**2002:** Local Government Association publishes 'Faith and Community' guide to 'encourage local authorities in all parts of the country to develop good working relationships with the faith groups and interfaith structures in their area.'<sup>16</sup>

**2003:** University of Leeds academics commissioned to explore the feasibility of a regional faith forum for Yorkshire and the Humber (Knott, McLoughlin and Prideaux, 2003) funded by the Yorkshire and Humber Assembly in association with the Churches Regional Commission.

**December 2003:** Equalities legislation was enacted which added religion and belief, age and sexual orientation to gender, race and disability as 'protected characteristics'

**August 2005:** Establishment of the Yorkshire and Humber Faiths Forum and publication of 'Religious Literacy: a practical guide to the region's faith communities' (Knott and Horn, 2002) by the Churches Regional Commission for Yorkshire and the Humber together with the Yorkshire and the Humber Assembly and rolling out of 'religious literacy' training across regional faith fora.

**2006:** Leeds City Council commissions research about the best way to bring perspectives from each group identified in Equalities legislation to the Local Authority

**2007:** 'Red Paint Report' recommends the establishment of a series of equalities 'hubs', including a 'religion or belief' hub comprising representatives of Leeds' faith communities.

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<sup>15</sup> The timeline identifies initiatives identified by our respondents and is not comprehensive.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.fbrn.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/faith-community-lga-2002%5B1%5D.pdf>



## Annex C: Key Actors

**Concord** - Interfaith fellowship for individuals which exists to ‘foster friendship, trust, tolerance, understanding and cooperation among members of the faith communities of multi-cultural Leeds.’<sup>17</sup>

**Leeds Faiths Forum** - representative body which enables faith communities (joining on an organisational basis) ‘to enter into dialogue with each other and with the relevant organs of Government’<sup>18</sup>

**Equalities Assembly** - ‘a forum, made up of Equality Hubs, which helps ensure Leeds City Council is engaging with and involving the full range of citizens that live in Leeds in the decisions it makes. It offers all equality groups the opportunity to meet and work together to let the council know the issues that affect them.’<sup>19</sup>

**Religion or Belief Hub** - network of faith community representatives supported by the Leeds City Council Equalities Team

**Community Religions Project** - since 1976, University of Leeds students and scholars have conducted ‘empirical research on religion and religions ‘near at hand’ in the cities of Leeds and Bradford.’<sup>20</sup> The Community Religions Project also acts as a base for research and consultancy in relation to religious literacy in public policy.

**Centre for Religion and Public Life** - an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Leeds which seeks to ‘overturn the neglect or marginalisation of religious factors in many academic and popular debates about public life’<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See Concord Website: <http://www.concord-leeds.org.uk/index.htm>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/local/membershipissues.htm>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/council/Pages/Equality-Assembly.aspx>

<sup>20</sup>

[http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125010/the centre for religion and public life/1707/community religions project](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125010/the%20centre%20for%20religion%20and%20public%20life/1707/community%20religions%20project)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125010/>



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