

Minutes of the Faith Communities Forum meeting 03 June 2020

Attendance:

Aled Edwards	Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Gethin Rhys	Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Rheinallt Thomas	Free Church Council of Wales
Christine Abbas	Baha'i Faith
Vivian Bartlett	Baha'i Faith
Sakti Guha	Hindu Council of Wales
Radhika Kadaba	Hindu Council of Wales
George Stack	Archbishop of Cardiff, Roman Catholic Church
Sian Rees	Evangelical Alliance
Abdul-Azim Ahmed	Muslim Council of Wales
Kate McColgan	Chair of the Interfaith Council for Wales
John Davies	Archbishop of Wales, Church in Wales
Meraj Hussein	Muslim Council of Wales
Joga Singh	Sikh Council of Wales
Gurmit Singh Randhawa	Sikh Council of Wales
Laurence Kahn	South Wales Jewish Representative Council
Melody Odey	South Wales Jewish Representative Council

Apologies:

Nor'dzin Pamo	Buddhist representative
Radhika Kadaba	Hindu Council of Wales

• Welcome and introductions

The Deputy Minister and Chief Whip (DM&CW) welcomed and thanked attendees, acknowledging the good turnout and emphasising that the advice and guidance of the forum is more important than ever.

The DM&CW acknowledged the recent tragic death of George Floyd in the US and noted the important work of the BAME Advisory Group chaired by Judge Ray Singh and Heather Payne.

The DM&CW informed the forum of the launch of the Covid 19 Risk Assessment tool:

- The tool has been introduced into the NHS and social care. All health boards need to use it, owing to the disproportionate impact on BAME people.
- The tool is developing as we learn from responses. Underlying socioeconomic disadvantages are significant. We must address race inequality in Wales across the board.
- The FCF is mindful of these issues, sharing experiences during Ramadan. Interfaith engagement has been inspirational.

Action 1 – Forum Members to consider the risk assessment tool and related Written Statement

The DM&CW advised of the need to now progress the Race Equality Action Plan she committed to in March. She shared that Public Health Wales has published a statement on the impact of Covid 19 on BAME people in Wales.

- **Item 1: Update on the BAME Covid 19 Health Advisory Group and sub groups**

The DM&CW invited the chairs of the BAME Covid 19 Advisory group and its sub-committees to update the Wales Faith Forum.

Judge Ray Singh (RS) outlined the work of the BAME Covid 19 Advisory group:

- It was initiated after Judge Singh and other medical and professional colleagues wrote to the First Minister, DMCW and the Chief Medical Officer about the disproportionate impact of CV19 on the BAME communities.
- The First Minister (FM) invited him to co-chair the group with Dr Heather Payne who is a Welsh Government official.
- The groups focus is on excessive and disproportionaterisk to BAME communities from a Covid 19 Health perspective.
- The group and subgroup's membership is inclusive and from a range of backgrounds.
- The groups Terms of Reference focuses on identifying actions to mitigate and minimise risks to health and social care workers.

Prof. Keshav Senghal outlined the risk assessment tool which has already been rolled out. He advised:

- It can be used in 2 mins and is simple to follow
- Next it can be rolled out to the police and other public sector organisation
- Professor Senghal shared a web interface for the Risk Assessment Tool which should be finalised soon and rolled out.
- New evidence is constantly reviewed, but nothing so far has prompted revisions to the tool.

Judge Singh shared the work of the group chaired by Prof. Ogbonna.

- It focuses on socio-economic factors and medium-long term measures to address them.
- A key finding is poor availability of ethnicity data which makes finding answers difficult.
- Judge Singh urges community leaders to unite and focus on bringing about overdue changes with positive ideas.
- Covid 19 has exposed many realities but it feels like Welsh Government is listening.

Dr. Heather Payne advised: the group is trying to establish effective lines of communication and will be producing a report in the next week or two.

Faith Communities Forum members mentioned Citizens UK and an initiative launched by Evangelical Alliance UK working with BAME churches and encouraged that the advisory group engage with these organisations.

The FM joined the meeting and added that the BAME Advisory group and Risk Assessment tool were just raised at the Senedd, and noted MS's interest in this work.

Judge Singh emphasised the importance of communications in exploring socio-economic factors affecting BAME communities and how to reverse these.

The DMCW emphasised the primary importance of public health and health education.

- **Item 2: Unlocking places of worship (review of the consultation and consideration of a draft protocol)**

The DMCW introduced the subject of the phased re-opening of buildings in Wales, and thanked members for their leadership and work in establishing what might be able to happen and when.

- The FM's roadmap out of the pandemic, published 15 May, was the start of a conversation.
- The FM has asked all sectors to co-produce protocols with those most affected.
- Many members spoke to officials the day the roadmap was launched.
- We will work in partnership on an interfaith basis. The discussions and written submissions provided by the forum will inform the next lockdown review.
 - o Some clarity on the approach for unlocking was provided at the last Forum meeting.
 - o On 22 May we invited feedback.
 - o Written responses followed and on Monday a Task & Finish (T&F) group met.
 - o The T&F group is working quickly on a draft protocol for a phased re-opening.

The DMCW asked Aled Edwards (AE) to update further as a member of the Task and Finish Group. AE thanked the DM for the intro and reminded the group of the process to reach this point.

- The Task and Finish group methodology was shaped by that of the BAME Advisory group.
- This involved gathering input, sharing a draft then inviting partners to lend expertise and concerns into a living document. Work is required to identify specific issues and principles.
- The protocol will signpost the way and match the traffic light system in the FM's roadmap.
- Main points included the importance of co-operation, social cohesion, personal and community safety, and the need for a Welsh Government (WG) steer on what is appropriate at certain points.
- Capacity to manage/organise venues is a key challenge, the initial doc has been prepared and can be built upon.

Eleri Davies shared an early draft of the protocol for feedback.

- Officials have been guided by comments regarding priorities of the task and finish group.
 - o Detail in the protocol will be balanced with flexibility so all faith groups can move forward together.
- Gaps include technical guidance which isn't there yet.
 - o Feedback is required from other WG colleagues with expertise in different areas.
- The T&F group has seen this overnight, there has been a clear desire that the protocol should be science led, which is key to how leaders communicate with communities.
- Some comments received from churches and chapels on concerns that keeping PoWs closed is disproportionate, mentioning article 9 of the Human Rights Act.

Eleri Davies handed to Hannah Fisher who summarised the feedback to the protocol so far and noted that WG officials from other departments were in attendance to hear feedback of the forum directly.

- Wording will be honed to reflect different needs, more detail on cleaning and clarifying social distancing measures, food preparation, embedding the Track, Trace, Protect system.

- Officials will take on feedback to the T&F group on the separation of religious activities from social/community engagement activities.
- WG officials are in touch with the UK Government taskforce, Scottish and NI colleagues.
- The opening of non-essential retailers when Places of Worship are closed feels unfair to many.

The DM thanked the T&F group and asked for responses (summarised below).

- A trial period was proposed to practise new measures, socially distanced with limited numbers, changing the habits of a lifetime for many in how to pray etc.
 - o The DMCW agreed trialling is important.
- Pressure to open Places of Wales for private prayer was mentioned.
 - o The Roman Catholic Church has prepared a Health & Safety toolbox for all activities.
 - o An amber light would be welcome for churches fulfilling criteria in the H&S toolbox.
- Public health measures must be paramount. No normal prayers until full green light.
- Mental health impacts on congregations were raised, a phased return was recommended.
 - o The DMCW noted Public Health Wales identified these issues in all communities, including BAME communities
- Cross-border links were encouraged, consistency is important if possible to avoid confusion
 - o The FM has tried to adopt a Four Nations approach to all easing of lockdown
 - o We're into phase 2 of the lockdown review, advice of CMO and Sage is paramount
 - o Volunteers, many in at-risk categories, must be protected.
- Social support provided by Places of Worship was mentioned as well as serving of food.
- As schools open, groups meeting in church buildings (nurseries etc.) should be considered.
- The inclusion of weddings in Amber phase is welcome for traditions where co-habiting is not permitted.
 - o Guidance on how many can attend weddings was requested
- Consideration/guidance is required for BAME and Pentecostal churches which meet for several hours.

The FM remarked that he had been listening carefully to the discussion and wanted to offer the forum some clarity that the WG is keen in this 3 week review cycle to consider early steps to safely re-open places of worship to allow controlled opportunities for private prayer.

- Plans in Scotland and England are being developed, and it is permitted in Northern Ireland
- We want to provide permission to faith groups to take first steps within a rulebook we create together. However this will not provide an obligation.

The DMCW said the protocol will be developed in the next two weeks, before the next review point.

Prof Senghal said that for the time being:

- It is useful to separate community and religious activity.
- Private prayer would be advisable by appointment system. Only online services.
- No large community events should be planned and no serving of food.

The DM&CW noted the strong measure of consensus thanks to good relationships.

- There is a clear amber light from FM.
- Officials will take the T&F group onwards.

- Guidance from Public Health Wales (PHW) is important for the T&F group, all said this should lead guidance,
- The DM&CW will make sure feedback from PHW and the Chief Medical Officer is passed on to the Forum as it comes in.

- **Item 3: Memorialisation and remembrance**

The DMCW stated the importance of considering how we remember and memorialise those we lose to Covid 19 and to consider tributes and bereavement support. She thanked the Archbishop of Wales for bringing to her attention the Remember Me project at St Paul's and explained to the group what this was.

The Archbishop of Wales explained that he had shared the Remember me project with WG because the Welsh experience could be lost if mixed with the UK project. He suggested that it would be positive to promote Welsh interfaith relations.

As time was running short and further discussion was required the DMCW asked Forum members to write to officials with any additional comments and suggested that the forum meet again in the next few weeks.

- Close

Action – Forum Members to consider the risk assessment tool and related Written Statement