

Faith Communities Forum

1 October 2020 - Microsoft Teams

Attending

Jane Hutt MS (Chair)	Deputy Minister and Chief Whip, Welsh Government
Aled Edwards	Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Gethin Rhys	Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Rheinallt Thomas	Free Church Council of Wales
Abdul-Azim Ahmed	Muslim Council of Wales
Meraj Hasan	Muslim Council of Wales
Laurence Kahn	South Wales Jewish Representative Council
John Davies	Archbishop of Wales, Church in Wales
Sian Rees	Evangelical Alliance
Vivian Bartlett	Baha'i Faith
Christine Abbas	Baha'i Faith
Sakti Guha Niyogi	Hindu Council of Wales
Kate McColgan	Chair of the Interfaith Council for Wales
Nor'dzin Pamo	Buddhist representative
Radhika Kadaba	Hindu Council of Wales
Gurmit Singh Randhawa	Sikh Council of Wales

Guests

Joanna Penberthy	Bishop of St Davids
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Apologies

George Stack	Archbishop of Cardiff, Roman Catholic Church
Melody Odey	South Wales Jewish Representative Council
Joga Singh	Sikh Council of Wales

Officials

Alyson Francis	Communities Division
Paul Webb	Equality Team
Eleri Davies	Equality Team
Andrea Adams	Equality Team
Robin Grossmann	Equality Team

Welcome

The Deputy Minister and Chief Whip (DM&CW) welcomed attendees and made the following points:

Health protection areas in Wales have been established to protect lives. However, it is clear that these areas have complicated issues such as travelling to worship, attending marriage ceremonies or funerals

We are grateful to community leaders for their support with these issues.

The DM&CW thanked those who have taken part on work in Advancing Human Rights and Equality, including the meeting on 30 July with Dr Simon Hoffmann.

The DM&CW noted that the First Minister (FM) held a successful meeting with the Board of Deputies of British Jews on 17 September to discuss a range of issues.

The DM&CW said that the situation at Penally camp will be discussed towards the end of the meeting and welcomed the Bishop of St Davids.

Item 1: Education Bill / Update on Religious Education

The DM&CW invited an update from Peter Kennedy (PK), Education Department:

400 responses were received to the Education Bill consultation. This week an external company supplied the final draft of the consultation analysis.

The Minister for Education (MfE) will make an announcement regarding the analysis in the coming weeks.

We have been consulting while the Bill goes through the legislative process any changes will only take place in phase 2.

The Children and Young People in Education Committee's own consultation on the wider curriculum is proceeding

Supporting documents are on the Senedd Cymru website, members of the Forum can submit their own responses.

The Education Department are publishing a Terms of Reference for a BAME History Group chaired by Prof. Charlotte Williams, looking at the whole curriculum and using the *Cynefin* framework.

The group will work with BAME communities, academics and professionals on a meaningful curriculum for all, helping learners be more ethically informed.

The MfE will speak about it on Radio Wales this afternoon. The Education department are making significant contributions to Black History Month 365.

The DM&CW invited questions:

Section 3.90 of the Bill, on representation on advisory councils, was queried following confusion in the draft around the number of advisory groups, potentially creating a situation (as in England) where the Chair regularly has to cast a deciding vote because of 2-2 split.

Comments from the Church in Wales (CiW) and Roman Catholic Church (RCC) were also raised regarding elements in the Bill which could result in religious schools being in breach of their trust deeds.

PK responded:

The 1996 Act will remain in place for England, legally there was no way to include non-religious groups without forming a fourth advisory group (AA). Technically there will be a fourth group, but all groups will meet together, and new regulations will limit the need for Chairs to cast deciding votes.

It is not intended to have an impact on trust deeds and we are in regular contact with education advisors from the churches.

Concerns were raised about uninformed comments from fringe groups and the impact on social cohesion from conspiracies (QANON etc.) with susceptible communities being misled.

DM&CW said we are aware of those elements, but noted the transparent arrangements in terms of Welsh Government consultations and the Education committee meeting throughout.

ACTION: Officials to contact Forum members when the MfE has made an announcement about RVE.

The DM&CW made final remarks:

Prof. Charlotte Williams is undertaking important work on the curriculum based on *Cynefin*, a curriculum goal.

At 1pm, BHM 365 launches with a range of speakers. The Welsh Government (WG) will fund the organisers for 12 months.

On Tuesday there will be a race debate in the Senedd. We need to be united on inequality and discrimination.

Last week WG responded to Prof Ogbonna's report on impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities.

Item 2: Update on Places of Worship (PoW)

The DM&CW thanked all members of the Task and Finish group working closely with the Welsh Government, now also through the Health Protection measures.

This is a gradual re-opening, communal singing is not permitted while there is a risk that Covid-19 may spread in the air.

We hope to allow groups of 6 to sing but these are early days. We must mitigate the spread of the virus, similar to actions taken in the performing arts.

The FM's press conference tomorrow with 21 day review considerations will explain that local restrictions mean different arrangements in different areas.

People's usual PoW may not be accessible, we are considering impacts but must use caution, new evidence arrives daily.

Test, Trace, Protect is working well, people trust in public services, we have 86% tracing in place in Wales.

The DM&CW expressed admiration at the innovation demonstrated by PoWs, video calls, social media, coffee mornings etc. breaking down social isolation.

Officials have held two open engagement sessions chaired by Aled Edwards and Alyson Francis to discuss issues around opening PoW, officials are planning another session to look at the impact of recent local restrictions.

ACTION: officials to share a date for the next engagement session on Places of Worship (PoW).

The DM&CW invited Paul Webb (PW) to speak before questions:

Community centres, often managed by faith groups need clearer guidance. The T&F group discussed the legal requirements for upholding regulations. We can reinforce the message: PoWs are responsible for explaining the guidance on masks etc. but can accept visitors' assurances that they are exempt. We will try to make this clearer in WG guidance.

The distinction between singing in congregations and small groups is because volume is fundamental, control of a small organised group is easier than a large congregation. There is a body of evidence, the position is under review.

Remembrance Sunday often leads to an increase in attendance by people who do not attend regularly and may not be aware of regulations.

Aled Edwards (AE) shared thanks for meaningful collaboration between WG and faith groups.

Engagement has improved conditions and led to solutions that work across the group.

In a handful of cases an asymptomatic carrier was tested positive, with no further transmission – regulations keep visitors to PoW safe.

AE expressed gratitude to the team, doing their best under circumstances.

Some communities do not have a PoW in their areas and would need to cross border, some congregations are spread out. Is there an update?

PW said there is no absolute conclusion.

Officials have represented the case that local health protection measures affect different faith groups unequally, and Human Rights / Equality legislation supports crossing borders to attend worship as a reasonable excuse.

The counter argument that these are exceptional circumstances and we must protect public health.

Also, guidance with too many exceptions is confusing. We will put out clear messaging when a decision is made.

We can be clear that it is reasonable to cross boundaries to lead worship.

Gurmit Singh Randhawa noted that most gurdwaras are in Cardiff but many worshippers live in the valleys. This is significant in terms of human rights.

Gethin Rhys noted the following points:

Recently people have confused regulations on 1) reasonable excuses to cross borders and 2) reasonable excuses to gather.

Regulations number 34 pages and must be simplified.

The traffic light system described initially suggested movement between Amber and Green stages as required, but new regulations were introduced instead. Why aren't traffic lights being used?

The DM&CW acknowledged all points and confirmed that we will feedback to colleagues immediately and.

In response to questions about hiring halls/venues for festivals/congregational worship, PW confirmed that halls can be classed as PoW if hired for worship to be exempt from regulations on gathering. Revised guidance will try to reflect this.

The DM&CW noted the preferred term is Health Protection Zones, not lockdown areas, and acknowledged the human rights impacts.

Item 3: Ceremonies Group Update

The DM&CW noted the following:

Officials continue to receive a high volume of queries about weddings.

There are no plans in Wales to reduce the permitted number of attendees at receptions or wakes, although this is constantly under review.

Those living in health protection zones can travel to attend a wedding or funeral, but not the reception or wake.

Social distancing, hygiene, face coverings etc. remain important.

PW added the following points:

The FM's message reinforces the importance of faith

Weddings are distinct from celebrations afterwards and are the last thing we would restrict.

Decisions will be evidence-based. Weddings under regulations are not causing problems.

It was noted that PoW have been creative in dealing with face coverings for weddings but requested exemptions from couples getting married with distancing (using a different aisle etc. as this is important for families.

PW said Public Health colleagues have been consulted, guidance to be updated.

The DM&CW noted that the FM hopes to take a Four Nations approach but differences complicate things. Messaging is important, those in east Wales are impacted by English regulations/issues.

Item 4 - Remembrance Sunday

The DM&CW said that the Welsh Government is engaged in preparations for Remembrance Sunday in November which is important to so many.

This year remembrance will look very different and must consider regulations.

The WG will mark the day at the Wales Field of Remembrance.

The National Service of Remembrance will have limited capacity, details to follow. Organisers should monitor announcements for permitted activities.

ACTION: Officials to share relevant information on Remembrance Day.

The DM&CW also noted previous conversations in the forum about a memorial for those affected by a pandemic.

PW said Comms colleagues have been advised to include messaging for PoW in announcements.

AOB:

Race Equality Action Plan (REAP):

The WG committed in March to REAP, and asked the Faith Communities Forum to co-construct this and help engage with communities/grassroots.

Some members have expressed interest in community engagement grant, need to reach grassroots.

The Race Forum will expand to include young people, the BLM movement, housing issues and Socio-economic issues.

The DM&CW asked Hannah Fisher (HF) to provide an update:

Usha Ladwa-Thomas is leading and will update in future.

We recently opened an award scheme for a community engagement grant.

A literature review is underway of research on tackling racism and inequality, to enable prioritisation and be evidence-led

Education, Health, Employment will be key, but other areas too.

We would be grateful if the Faith Forum could be represented on the new REAP steering group. The intersection of Race and Faith will be addressed clearly in the next months.

ACTION – Officials to invite the Forum members to nominate a member/rolling members for the REAP steering group.

The DM&CW said the Faith Forum will be happy to engage and noted the need to publish the REAP before the end of the Senedd session, then feed into local areas.

AE noted progress and mentioned discussions with the Evangelical Alliance on black-led churches and the prospect of representation on the Faith Forum.

SR noted surprise that we don't have black-led representation on the FCF.

The DM&CW agreed that the REAP should reflect this.

Penally Asylum Seeker Camp

The DM&CW spoke about WG's commitment to being a Nation of Sanctuary.

The WG was not consulted by UK Government on decision to use Penally as accommodation for Asylum Seekers. The FM has written to the Home Secretary to demand close engagement to deal with the challenges.

Local public services have responded strongly, planning has only just begun.

We have no reassurance from UK Government, issues need to be addressed. The FM asked for a 2 week delay but this was not acknowledged.

Wales had success with the Syrian Refugee Programme, a Home Office programme, with many families prepared to house refugees facing delays. Work related to the Home Office is devolved, but the WG wants to co-operate.

The DM&CW invited input from Cytûn and the Bishop of St Davids.

Aled Edwards said the following:

Maria Battle of Hywel Dda Health Board has offered support

Far Right Groups have been protesting online and physically at the site.

Cytun has been working with the Muslim Council of Wales.

We need to garner support not duplicate work, use Zoom conferences to consider the local situation, use local resources, and help individuals.

There are likely 240 men in Penally, possibly long-term because of surplus demand in hotels.

The DM&CW thanked AE and invited Bishop of St Davids to speak.

The Bishop of St Davids thanked AE and noted the following points:

There is no parish priest in Penally, being recently retired.

The need to be honest about the deficiencies of site and difficulties for the local health board, without undermining the Nation of Sanctuary message.

The DM&CW agreed and said:

Failings in terms of the site must not distract from the need to make this work.

Asim Hassif, the Home Office lead, has good knowledge of Wales

Penally is the constituency of the Secretary of State for Wales, he will be supportive of finding a resolution.

Maria Battle, from Penally originally, helping to gather resources.

The Police & Crime commissioner Dafydd Llewellyn is also playing his part.

Asylum Seekers have faith needs.

The police are in a very difficult position dealing with Far Right protests.

CA noted the rise of extremist views and has written to the FM and Angela Burns MS in an individual capacity. CA emphasised the one-ness of the human race, supported by science and the marginality of extremist views.

The DM&CW said this was an inspiring way to complete this item. Alyson Francis can be contacted as lead for Communities.

Archbishop John Davies (JD) raised the wider context of Wales' relationship with the UK Government.

The constituency is the Secretary of State's and can draw Home Secretary's attention to how this has been managed.

Right wing extremist groups appear quickly in response to these issues. There seems to be an infrastructure that facilitates this.

Police must be investigate how efficiently these groups operate.

The Secretary of State may also request the Home Office's help in dealing generally with Far Right groups.

AE said Wales' faith communities have had a good relationship with the Home Office in the past, but noted a level of hostility now, possibly as a result of high-profile acceptance of far right messages.

JD said that clear guidance on Remembrance Sunday would be helpful, some groups do not respond well to advice from clergy.

DM&CW thanked all for sharing views and enlightenment.

AF invited Forum members to get in touch via e-mail.

ACTIONS

- 1. Officials to contact Forum members when the MfE has made an announcement about RVE.**
- 2. Officials to share a date for the next engagement session on Places of Worship (PoW).**
- 3. Officials to share relevant information on Remembrance Day.**
- 4. Officials to invite the Forum members to nominate a member/rolling members for the REAP steering group.**

Meeting ends.