

Faith Communities Forum 03/03/2021

Microsoft Teams

Attendance

Chair: The Deputy Minister and Chief Whip, Jane Hutt MS
John Davies, Archbishop of Wales
Sian Rees, Evangelical Alliance
Melody Odey, South Wales Jewish Representative Council
Sakti Guha Niyogi, Hindu Council of Wales
Radhika Kadaba, Hindu Council of Wales
Maureen Earle, One Accord
Lester Freckleton, One Accord
Chris Abbas, Baha'i Fath
Abdul-Azim Ahmed, Muslim Council of Wales
Meraj Hasan, Muslim Council of Wales
Gurmit Singh Randhawa, Sikh Council of Wales
Gethin Rhys, Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Rheinallt Thomas, Free Church Council

Item 1: Welcome and Update

The Deputy Minister & Chief Whip (DM&CW) welcomed attendees and noted that two members have had to step down from the Forum: Nordzin Pamo (Buddhist representative) and Viv Bartlett (Baha'i representative).

The DM&CW thanked forum members for sharing accurate information and countering misinformation, and added that the vaccine is the only way to be safe.

The DM&CW said she spoke at a mentoring event on 20 February and another tonight, as well as the Vaccine Equality and Engagement Group. Important religious festivals are coming up, we want to hear about the challenges.

Item 2: Minutes and Actions

All members were content with the previous Minutes.

The DM&CW said the Curriculum Bill went through to Stage 3 yesterday and has amended the requirement for religious schools to include non-religious content. A Transcript of the debate is on the Senedd website.

The DM&CW said we need to consider the duty of Church in Wales ministers to carry out funeral duties within the Ceremonies group.

Previous Actions

The DM&CW said she had met with One Accord to discuss their membership of the Forum.

The DM&CW said we still view Penally camp as unsuitable and have been working hard to deal with this. The First Minister wrote to the Chief Inspector of Immigration Services to ask for an inspection at Penally and we provided evidence. Hopefully the report will follow shortly, serious concerns remain. The Welsh Government will act as an interested party in the judicial review due to the conflict with our Nation of Sanctuary approach. All faiths have been involved and chaplaincies have been tremendous. Support from local people and engagement has been wonderful, thanks to Aled Edwards particularly

Item 3: Census 2021

The DM&CW reminded members that the census takes place Sunday 21 March, data is used by authorities at all levels to make decisions. High quality data is essential for resource allocation etc.

The DM&CW invited Sue Leake (SL) to speak.

SL said we encourage the public to complete it online on various devices, but paper forms are available. Safety during the operational phase will follow national guidelines. Centres will open to help people fill in their forms, but only if safe.

SL said that materials are available in various languages to encourage others (on social media etc.) to complete the census. Questions about religion on the form are similar to 2011 census, alongside national identity and ethnic group. It is a voluntary question but also allows for no religion or to write in another religion. No guidelines or expectations on how to respond. The ONS has appointed 12 engagement managers to work with different communities. An information session will be held on 17 March at 2pm.

SL confirmed that a 16 digit code will be sent to people by post so that they can complete the census online.

The DM&CW said that the ONS is independent from Government and protected by law. Information is always kept anonymous.

Item 4: Update on the pandemic

The DM&CW asked Cathy Weatherup (CW) from the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) office for latest info on new variants.

CW said the UK position is improving across all ages. Last week the four nations' CMOs recommended a downgrade from level 5 to 4. The R number for Wales is 0.7-0.9. Data from Public Health Wales (PHW) shows the percentage of tests returned positive is decreasing and cases per 100,000 decreased since last week across all areas. The number of people with Covid-19 in hospitals continue to decrease but numbers are still relatively high. Death rates continue to fall in line with the 5 year average. Relaxations are being considered as part of the 21 day review. The recently published Control Plan sets priorities in terms of reopening schools for face-to-face learning. We are monitoring data daily.

Prolonged restrictions prevented the spread of the virus, we proceed with caution, taking three weeks to assess impacts before making further changes. We need to use all measures, social distancing, hand washing etc.

Sakti Guha (SGN) suggested more analysis of specific groups reluctant to take the vaccine. Blanket statistics will not help specific sub-groups struggling with acceptance, causing future problems.

The DM&CW said the Vaccines team will respond on the next item.

The DM&CW said it would be useful to know how many Places of Worship (PoW) are closed, how many plan to re-open, and the challenges faced by different faiths. At the next three week review the FM will announce outcomes and would be grateful for feedback now.

Rheinallt (RT) said in general Free Churches have freely chosen to close and are using Zoom. Some see Good Friday as the time to re-open while employing safety measures.

Gethin (GR) said for Christians in general outdoor worship is traditional at Easter. The TAG report on messaging suggests confusion as outdoor meetings are considered safer than indoors but is not allowed, where indoor meetings are permitted.

Lester Freckleton (LF) said many black-led churches did not close and is concerned that they are not following guidance. Some leaders say they will oppose vaccination. LF said his church plans to open before Easter.

Sian Rees (SR) said most Evangelical Alliance member churches remain closed and broadcast from their building. Some invite elderly people to sit in during the broadcast, which offers pastoral care. None are close to 50% capacity. There are questions raised about open air worship, children and young people missing regular activities.

Radhika Kadaba (RK) said temples are not open in Wales apart from limited access for festivals, and asked if people from Wales can visit temples in England which are open for festivals with social distancing.

Paul Webb (PW) confirmed that travel is permitted but there is guidance about visiting the nearest temple to you.

Gurmit Singh Randhawa (GSR) said gurdwaras closed on 20 September but aim to open from 21 March. There are issues around the elderly and Punjabi school in terms of restrictions. We need to encourage normal service.

Abdul Azim Ahmed (AA) said Ramadan is coming up on 12 April and we're working with the Equality branch on regulations. Allowing outdoor worship will be much safer and open up options.

John Davies, Archbishop of Wales (JD) said Easter is important. People are being sensible and have a choice to open if it's safe.

PW said you need to make informed decisions around risk assessments. Risk of new variants, need caution. Even after vaccination people need social distancing.

Item 5: Vaccination programme

The DM&CW said we published a National Vaccine Strategy 2 months ago, by now a million doses have been delivered.

The strategy has since been updated, there are issues around more infectious variants. Confidence in the vaccination programme is growing. The first milestone was covering the top 4 at-risk groups (high risk or high exposure). 38% of the adult population has received at least 1 dose of vaccine, a credit to NHS Wales, public sector partners, and partners like yourselves encouraging take-up.

The DM&CW introduced Bon Westcott (BW) and Rachel Taylor (RT) from the Vaccinations team.

BW said we need to think about engagement and putting ideas into operation. Some inequalities are emerging, how can that be addressed? We take advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, like all 4 nations.

The programme has been moved forward from Autumn, now looking at the next priority group by mid-April, and the rest of the population by July. Invitations have been issued to priority groups 5 and 6. Most groups are age-based, group 6 includes people 16-64 at risk for health reasons. We have taken recommendations on learning disability and carers and released guidance.

After Priority Groups 1-9, people under 50. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation's interim guidance for the next phase is to use age-based prioritisation, still a key factor linked to mortality. Moving away from age-based factors (such as occupation) would slow down the programme.

Work continues on engagement, there is some disparity around take-up with different groups. Much work to be done.

RT aid all health boards have submitted engagement plans for hard to reach communities: forums, links with GPs, pop-up centres, engagement workers, social

media, GPs from black and ethnic minority communities recording videos. Using an “imbalance” to reach out to different locations. Questionnaires to capture concerns. Religious centres and community hubs.

The mantra is “no-one left behind” no matter what the priority group we’ve reached.

AE shared a link to a Christian-focused engagement event. Communities tend to be enthusiastic. Questions have focused on foetal material and abortions. AE said congratulations on the general response in Wales.

AA said he wanted to highlight the work of Muslim Doctors Cymru Network which has grown phenomenally, including webinars with doctors in various languages, a survey on BAME vaccine hesitancy shared by PHW. Many colleagues are working on an interfaith video on acceptance of the vaccine across faiths. Only possible with the help of WG and the NHS.

GSR said we have done our part encouraging our community with seminars, making good progress, very few are reluctant.

SGN said the main concern is the need for statistics on the breakdown of groups to be targeted, instead of focusing on the broader group of BAME people.

DM&CW invited RT and BW to respond and thanked all for contributions, noting that Muslim Doctors Cymru Network is inspirational.

BW said second doses will be delivered alongside first doses.

RT said we’ve been working with a GP in Newport and looking to make the letter from the immunisation service more reader-friendly. The next round of data will be at health-board level. 1 million 70,000 doses delivered (first and second), hoping for 1 million first doses soon.

The DM&CW said the Evangelical Alliance has produced a video. Dr SGN’s point is important, we need to reach out to all groups.

DM&CW said this would be the last meeting of this administration before a possible election on May 6. It has been a privilege to chair these meetings over the last couple of years, an extraordinary help over the pandemic. Diolch yn fawr.

AE said thanks for DM’s leadership, immensely enabling.

The DM&CW handed over to PW.

Item 6: Ceremonies Group Update

PW said we want to expand on forthcoming events and guidance and gave an introduction to the Ceremonies group which advises on guidance for funerals, weddings and issues of upcoming festivals.

Dane Marsh (DM) raised issues of funeral details being publicised, uninvited guests and people lining streets of route, breaking social distancing. DM said the message is to be cautious, don’t publicise, attendance by invitation only.

Regarding attendance by people with Covid-19, the legal advice is complicated because not allowing attendance by people with Covid-19 would breach human rights regulations. Ministers or officers can make risk assessments and refuse to attend if they don't feel safe.

GR said lining routes has been going on for a year, issuing a message now will be problematic as bereaved families feel they have been allowed (treatment tolerated) police have been seen enabling this on TV. There will be resistance to messaging as relaxations are expected.

RT agreed especially as this is out in the open air, a perception of mixed messages about being outdoors and indoors which may alienate the population.

PW said the message is tied to the specific Alert Level.

DM&CW confirmed we are working on a new guidance update around alert levels that shows how regulations change between levels. No mention of standing outside homes etc. just confirming that at Alert Level 4 people are not meant to congregate outside.

PW said we won't emphasise points about lining the route but suggest we add a line to guidance about not congregating.

AE said we can control activities within our PoW but cannot control events outside. Suggest we advise families not to advertise funerals in local press etc. instead.

Chris Abbas (CA) said a forthcoming Baha'i funeral will take place over 30 minutes at the graveside only. The funeral director-owned chapel is closed. The DM&CW said this is likely to be a local issue.

PW said regulations have been updated to allow all approved premises to conduct wedding ceremonies e.g. hotels and visitor attractions. English regulations don't allow weddings of more than 6 people. People visiting Wales from England (including the couple) can only attend weddings of 6 people.

PW said we will call a meeting of the Task & Finish group to discuss forthcoming festivals, forum members are welcome to join. Outdoor worship, Ramadan and Eid will be discussed.

Meeting Ends.