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GOVERNMENT WANTS TO ENGAGE WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES ON SOCIAL CHALLENGES - JOHN DENHAM
- £2million funding boost for faith groups -

Recognising the important role that faith plays in the lives of individuals, at the national launch of England's first-ever Inter Faith Week, Communities Secretary John Denham will invite the views of faith communities on how to tackle some of the big challenges facing society, like parenting and the environment.

Inter Faith Week (15 to 21 November) is being facilitated by Communities and Local Government in partnership with the Inter Faith Network for the UK. It is faith-community led with organisations around the country holding events – from art exhibitions to inter faith seminars; from football matches to pilgrimage walks; from the good deeds of Mitzvah Day to the good food of shared meals - to bring major faith communities, as well as those with no religious beliefs, closer together.

Mr Denham has responsibility for the Government's public policy on faith. Stressing the importance of respecting faith in its own right, and not as a prop to Government when it has a problem to solve, he will say he wants to see a deeper and broader relationship between Government and faith communities.

Government already engages with faith communities through the Faith Communities Consultative Council (FCCC) where representatives of all the major religions are consulted on policy questions of mutual interest. To deepen this relationship, he has had a round of intensive discussions with faith leaders and he is recruiting a panel of advisers to act as a sounding board on issues of faith and public policy.

In the midst of a global economic recession driven by lending, Mr Denham believes that the values which faith groups share – justice, equality, engagement - and the aim

of Inter Faith Week to bring people of faith and no faith together, could be a starting point for building consensus for a stronger, fairer society.

Speaking at the national launch of Inter Faith Week at the QEII, London, John Denham said:

“Government should respect – should value, prize and celebrate – those things which matter to citizens. And for many, their faith shapes and defines who they are and this deserves respect.

“But Government and politicians are also interested in how society can be shaped for the better. Whether it is parenting, personal health, or sustainability, government is interested in what makes people tick. For millions of people the values instilled by their faith are central to shaping their behaviour. We should continually encourage and enhance the contribution faith makes on the central issues of our time.

“Inter Faith week creates more opportunities for people of different faiths, including young people, to explore how their faith helps them understand and respond to these challenges and, through this, build a stronger society.”

Bishop Tom Butler and Dr Girdari Bhan, Co-Chairs of the Inter Faith Network for the UK said:

“We are delighted at the level of response to Inter Faith Week. It has clearly caught the imagination of people around the country.”

Dr Indarjit Singh, FCCC member and Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations of the UK said:

“Inter Faith week should move us from the usual polite exchange of pleasantries to actually looking to ways of replacing false barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice that divide our different religions, with sympathetic understanding and true respect for different ways of life.”

Mr Denham welcomes the practical value to society in having faith groups work closely together to overcome social division, promote cohesion and build social capital. The efforts of faith groups to build relationships at a local level – not only amongst themselves, but also with the police, politicians and councils – has helped manage tension in the face of extreme provocation from right-wing extremists.

To support this, faith communities around the country are set to receive £2million to encourage more local inter faith activity, helping to bring people from different backgrounds together to tackle shared problems.

He added:

“I am confirming that we are making £2 million available through the Faiths in Action programme; which faith, inter faith, voluntary and community sector groups can bid for to support projects which will bring people of faith and without faith together to overcome social division and promote cohesion. Faith is a strong and powerful source of honesty, solidarity, generosity - the very values which are essential to politics, to our economy and our society.”

Mr Denham is clear about the common interests government and faith communities share. For instance how parents see their obligations to their children and to each other or the concept of ‘stewardship’ and a common interest in not destroying the planet on which we live. This is why he is keen to acknowledge and welcome the contribution faith makes to shaping behaviour and transmitting values but he is clear that it isn’t necessary to have faith to be deeply moral and profoundly altruistic.

Notes to editors

1. The new funding announced today is being made available to support local activities over the coming years. Faiths in Action aims to bring communities together, promoting positive relationships between people of religious and non-religious beliefs together within local communities to work closely together to overcome social division and promote cohesion and beliefs at a local level. It is a £4m grants programme open to faith, inter faith, voluntary and community organisations and groups in England and is being distributed in two rounds. A total of 216 groups received grants of up to £12,000, totalling £2million in round one in February 2009. Faiths in Action is administered by the Community Development Foundation (CDF) on behalf of Communities and Local Government. For more information please visit <http://www.cdf.org.uk/web/guest/faiths-in-action>

2. In July 2008 the Department published Face to Face and Side by Side – a Framework for Partnership in our Multi Faith Society. This presented the Government's strategy for encouraging the further development of inter faith activity in England. It set out how faith communities, Government and wider society can work together, at all levels, to bring people with different religions and beliefs together. One of the commitments was to work in partnership with the Inter Faith Network for the UK to organise an Inter Faith Week in 2009.
3. The first stage of broadening the relationship between government and faith committees will be continuing to seek advice from the FCCC and supplementing this with advice from a new faith expert panel and policy adviser. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/racecohesionfaith/faith/faithcommunities/faithcommunitiesconsultative/>
4. Francis Davis, fellow of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford has just been appointed faith policy adviser to John Denham. He directs the Hall's work on governance, social responsibility, faith and the public sphere. He is also Director of the [Las Casas Institute](#) on Ethics, Human Rights And Social Justice. Since 2007 he has been Visiting Lecturer in social enterprise and community development at the University of Cambridge where from 2006-08 he co-directed a research centre on faith in society. A Visiting Fellow at the Helen Suzman Foundation in South Africa he is on the board of judges of the £300,000 Erste Bank Foundation Prize For Social Integration in South East Europe. In 2007-08, he was co-host and organiser of two major inter-religious colloquia in partnership with the Aga Khan University and the University of Haifa. His publications include a special edition of the leading policy journal, Public Money And Management (Routledge/CIPFA) on Religion, Third Sector And Public Management (Nov 2009).
5. Inter Faith Week is being facilitated by IFN but will be community-led, with local people and groups of different backgrounds holding their own events and to highlight work going on to promote understanding between people of different faiths and beliefs. Its aims are to strengthen good inter faith relations at all levels; to increase awareness of the different and distinct faith communities in the UK, in particular celebrating and building on the contribution which their members make to their neighbourhoods and to wider society; and to increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious belief. There will be a launch for religious leaders at Lambeth Palace on 16 November.
6. The English Regional Faith Forums have been collating and listing local inter faith events and details are available on their website <http://www.erffn.org.uk/> The Government is providing £130K to help support community groups to develop and grow these projects.
7. The Week will highlight the contribution of faith groups to the welfare of society and the importance of inter faith activity and understanding. Faith groups, their places of worship, schools, universities local authorities and other public bodies are holding events that highlight the importance of inter faith understanding and faith in social action.
8. The Inter Faith Network for the UK was founded in 1987. It links in membership national representative organisations of the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths in the UK; national, regional and local inter faith organisations; and educational and academic bodies with an interest in inter faith issues. It works with its member bodies and other agencies to promote good relations between the faith communities in the UK; to combat inter religious prejudice and intolerance; and to help make the UK a country marked by mutual understanding and respect between religions where all can practise their faith with

integrity. Inter Faith Week is also being marked in Wales. An annual Inter Faith Week already takes place in Scotland.

9. There is a long and positive history in this country of people coming together to talk about and explore their own and each others religions and beliefs in order to build understanding and respect. This dialogue has increased in recent years with 183 new inter faith groups having been established since 2000.
10. As a nation we are cohesive with 81 per cent of people believing that people from different backgrounds get on well in their area, and 77 per cent believing they belong strongly to their neighbourhood. However the majority of people questioned in CLG's latest citizenship survey felt there was a need for people from different religious and ethnic groups to mix more.
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/racecohesionfaith/research/citizenship/survey/>

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