Faith, Seldom Heard Groups & Social Action in Southwark

A Community Focus Group
Introduction

Community Southwark is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in the London Borough of Southwark. Social Action is a priority for Community Southwark, and through its Community Action Network (SouthwarkCAN) programme, it aims to ensure that:

Residents have increased opportunities to make connections with others in their local communities;

* Residents have opportunities to take part in social action; and

* Residents are more enabled to share their views on their local community.

Community Southwark is engaging with people from seldom heard communities within the borough to ensure that we can find ways to listen to and support people who face barriers to being active in their communities. We are hosting a series of ongoing focus groups with a diverse range of people from seldom-heard communities to gain an insight into issues that matter to people in these communities and, where necessary, to find ways of providing information and connections to services that could be of use to these individuals.

Faith is recognised as being an integral part of life in Southwark, with an estimated 74% of residents being affiliated with a faith group (2011 Census). SouthwarkCAN has engaged with a plethora of organisations within the borough, and it has been evident that residents in the borough have a significant relationship with religious institutions or faiths. From a civic society point of view, faith communities can provide an access point to communicate with people from seldom heard communities in a way that many organisations struggle with. Likewise, faith groups were seen to be a significant driver in Social Action in the borough.

Research from the Cinnamon Network Faith Action Audit (2016) shows that faith-based social action projects provide a value of over £58 million in London alone. In a time of austerity, this demonstrates a vital contribution towards welfare and other local services. Through this work, faith groups provide support to a variety of seldom heard communities and these initiatives provide important intelligence on how to successfully engage with these communities. To further understand this, a focus group to explore this was organised.

We invited faith groups that operate within Southwark to attend the meeting. The aim of the Faith and Social Action focus group was to:

- Identify social action initiatives led by faith groups in the borough;
- Determine the resources required to make these initiatives sustainable;
- Explore the extent that they support and engage people from seldom heard communities;
- Provide an opportunity for faith groups to connect and share important local knowledge.
The information collated in this report will be shared with the faith community, local community groups, and statutory organisations. Further engagement and research with faith groups will be on-going.

Overview of attendees

The focus group was held on 8th December 2016. There were 10 attendees in total. The breakdown is:

- Gender - 7 men, 3 women;
- Organisation representation - 1 public, 3 community organisations, 2 Muslim, 4 Christian.

In total, over 100 faith groups in Southwark were contacted, with regards to taking part in the focus group. The response rate to calls and emails was around 25%; this could be due to incorrect or dated contact details being advertised. The information on the focus group was disseminated through the Southwark Council Community Team, Community Southwark’s faith directory, directly through visiting faith groups, and community organisations.

Definitions

Terms within faith literacy such ‘faith community’ and ‘faith group’ can sometimes be without clear definition. For this report, the following terms will be used with the following definitions:

**Faith Group**: A group of people who collectively belong to a particular religious faith.

**Faith Community**: A collective term for the faith groups in the borough; which also includes faith based organisations.

**Multi-faith / Inter-faith**: Denotes that an action includes several groups from different religions.

**Social Action**: Relates to actions where people in a community come together to collectively find a solution to a problem or issue within that local community Seldom Heard Communities.
Theme 1: Social Action

All attendees felt that faith groups make a significant contribution to social action in the borough. One attendee added that faith groups were key drivers to the smooth running of the local community.

Unlike other organisations, competitive funding pressures are unlikely to prevent different faith groups from working collaboratively. One attendee stated that the greater good of providing service to others, outweighs concerns of 'stealing membership' from other faith groups, or worrying that one group is in competition with another. Another attendee stated a willingness to branch out from traditional methods of connecting with people, that may previously have been considered out of spiritual bounds, e.g. having Tai Chi lessons inside a church hall.

As a precursor to the focus group, social action was given a broad definition to help the attendees understand the context of the focus group. Six of the attendees hadn’t heard the term before, however, once explained, all the attendees could identify areas where they themselves or their local congregations were involved in social action initiatives.

All attendees expressed the view that whilst the role of faith groups is to provide information and advice on spiritual enrichment, the work that they do outside of religious buildings is much broader than that, and this is demonstrated in the initiatives that are currently taking place. A significant amount of the initiatives discussed concerned welfare, health and immigration. These ranged from projects that aim to feed the homeless and information and advice surgeries, to seminars that explore health issues and career development.

‘If the government is failing, I believe it is the duty of the church or mosque or whatever, to come together in harmony, to restore this shallow, which is the mission of God.’

Other programs discussed included collaborations with local organisations, such as HealthWatch around health programs, and wellbeing clubs that help develop Healthy Eating Breakfast Clubs for children.

Representatives from Churches United in Global Mission (CUGM) spoke about work they do within their locality in Rotherhithe.

‘Law firms come into the service to take and give advice. We get professionals to come and give advice rather than ourselves, around issues such as immigration and benefits, housing and employment. It is open to all’

On several occasions, it was noted that as the population of Southwark has grown, so have the needs that present themselves to faith groups.
There was a perception that the current Government is concerned with reducing its welfare responsibility to seldom heard groups and sees the faith community as an opportunity to shoulder some of the weight of welfare concerns, and reduce the drain on government resources. Attendees felt that the government was taking advantage of the resources within faith communities, and view it as a cheap alternative resource due to tithes / offerings / charitable gifts / financial support given to faith groups being noted as unrestricted funds. Some of the attendees believed that the faith community were being ‘handed’ the role of welfare state, but were not then being adequately being supported by the government.

'It was suggested that one should contact your local MP. The way that the law is now has changed so much, it is now designed to make life very hard if you are not a naturalised citizen.'

The reliance on volunteers was suggested as being a barrier to ensuring that the community support faith groups provide is of the required standard. One attendee shared a scenario where a member of his congregation requested immigration support. He described the situation as being ‘beyond him’ and felt that there was nothing more that he could do for her in that situation. The issue then arose: where do faith groups go to get support, and are they in contact with disconnected from the political system, were unsure how to communicate with their MP, and whether their issues would be taken seriously.

'It then falls back to the church, to the volunteers within the church to make up the slack.'

The attendees noted a desire to be more professional with the activities that are being done with faith groups, but they are finding it difficult to be able to attract individuals who have the time and desire to support this.

‘Our hands are tied because we do not have the professional capabilities. When you don’t have professional people at your disposal, you can only do little. Faith groups heavily use volunteers, and when they are sent in to settle a matter, their knowledge is limited.’

Several attendees questioned the role of MPs and councillors, which initiated a debate about the work that MPs are doing around immigration and whether it was in their power to do more to support seldom heard communities in their local constituencies. Additionally, some of the attendees felt

the necessary support services if they feel that there is a situation they do not have the resources to deal with.

‘I understand what you mean. We rely a lot on volunteers and there come points where you think, I actually can’t do anything about this, and I feel quite powerless about it…I don’t know where to go with that.’

During the focus group, a plethora of projects supporting social action in the borough were noted. For this report, contributions of the different projects will be kept to what was discussed during the focus group. An additional section with a brief list of current projects throughout the borough will be outlined at the end of this report.
Theme 2: Seldom Heard Groups

'We do these things because we believe that the world needs changing, and we don't believe that poverty, discrimination and violence are acceptable and we want to challenge it.'

All the faith group representatives stated that they believed faith groups are responsible for supporting the needs of seldom heard groups in Southwark and on a global basis. The premise of helping others, and a desire to help the most deprived was described as a universal principle across religions.

‘With regards to the different congregations that we have, this is an entry point for a lot of people who have a very ambiguous immigration status, and is very fragile, like you, I try to encourage people to take up whatever rights that they have.’

During the focus group, faith groups were described as the entry point for seldom heard communities into the borough, particularly the most vulnerable and individuals with an unknown immigration status, asylum seekers / refugees / anyone who has no recourse to public funds. Many of the support mechanisms aimed towards seldom heard communities are also listed in the earlier question around social action initiatives; they generally concerned welfare and community support.

Concerns were expressed about the sustainability of the support the faith community in Southwark can provide to the aforementioned groups and individuals. The need for appropriate information, advice and support was observed as being conversely related with the amount of government funding available to support it.

‘We can see the line of funding, we know that the Home Office used to give money for advice services, guidance and legal advice, legal aid has dried up, and we know that Southwark Council has been put into a difficult position.’

Reference was made to the diversity within Southwark, as well as the pockets of the borough that may be more / less diverse than others. Seldom heard groups such as Latin Americans, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean and Ugandans were discussed and celebrated for the number of faith groups that tailor religious services specifically to the diverse groups.

When the discussion turned to the inclusivity of any services and gatherings, all the faith groups stated that their buildings were accessible, however, not all events and services may be accessible, particularly to the
deaf community or those suffering dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. This is an issue that some groups are looking to remedy on an on-going basis. Information was also provided on groups and resources that can assist inclusion, particularly around Alzheimer’s Disease and dementia.

During the focus group, discussions on seldom heard groups focused heavily on the needs of refugees and asylum seekers within Southwark. All the faith groups stated that a significant amount of their work with seldom heard communities concerned immigration support.

‘It would be good to have a list of people to contact who can support with these types of issues.’

It was noted by one attendee that despite the completeness that can be implied by being part of religion / faith, this may not solve all the issues that someone has in their life. A question was posed to the attendees; ‘Do they have instances where dogma isn’t enough to help resolve someone’s personal circumstance, and what do they do if this happens”. Examples were given where faith groups are accepting of people who are ‘LGBT, have mental health concerns, disabilities, and differing races’.

The attendees responded that there was a need for faith groups and congregations to embrace diverse groups of people. The faith groups present stated that they were inclusive of all seldom heard groups.

“We embrace all, show love, and change to change people where it is possible. One thing that I realise that causes tensions. Man wants to change man... This is the error that we have been committing in leadership, in management; it is not possible, everybody is unique, and everybody needs to realise this.’

All attendees felt that interfaith projects were essential to providing well-needed support to seldom heard communities and those who may be considered the most vulnerable in society. Attendees felt that this work was already taking place, and gave several examples of this. One example was the community cohesion work currently being done by St Peter’s Church and the Muslim Association of Nigeria UK.

‘I love what is being done in Southwark, with churches and mosques.’

‘Why can’t we live together side by side in a harmonious way, that everyone can get to enjoy the token of life.’

Faith groups were cited as being both a support system for seldom heard groups, and an avenue for them to
take part in social action. For some faith groups this can be tricky to monitor, as given by the example below.

‘We had a very simple request from the BAME group within the church, trying to detect what the level of volunteering. Lots of people refused to fill the form in, and so we asked a second time. They said, ‘we don’t fill in the forms as this is how people find out about us, and we don’t have regular status here.’

This example highlights some of the tensions that can be encountered when reaching people through such a personal and informal part of their lives. The example above also suggests that there may be higher levels of BAME representation in volunteering, particularly if it is informal, and that there is a need to quantify this in a way that makes these volunteers feel safe and secure.

One of the borough’s Muslim representatives noted the work that they are doing to support communities around Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). They are actively educating their community on the legality around something that is viewed by some as essentially a social, traditional and/or religious cultural practice.

As faith groups provide support to a wide cross-section of people, a concern was raised regarding faith groups that may appear to be isolated, or reluctant to engage with other groups. For some of the attendees, this raised concerns on the need for faith groups to ensure that they have appropriate safeguarding policies and practices in place.

Reports such as Being Built Together (2013), the culmination of a partnership between Roehampton University, Southwark for Jesus and Churches Together in South London, demonstrate the breadth, size and growth of Black majority churches across Southwark. These churches, particularly new ones, may not have a traditional building, and instead rent a room in a community centre or school. One of the attendees noted that contact with these churches needs to be established so issues regarding faith groups in the borough can be communicated more effectively to them, and to ensure that the group meets the needs of the local community.

A discussion around safeguarding explored whether faith groups require a safeguarding policy. There was a difference in opinion on the context of what was necessary, e.g., if three people decide to have a prayer session in someone’s home, or whether a larger group of individuals came to together to pray in a rented space at a community centre.

Safeguarding was then explained by one of the attendees as having an appropriate procedure/policy in place to mitigate issues where vulnerable adults and child may be at risk of abuse or neglect. It was suggested that clarification on safeguarding with faith groups is needed. Groups were
encouraged to contact Community Southwark, who are currently providing support to organisations/groups that require advise and information. The details can be found at the end of this report.

One attendee noted that faith groups ‘cannot be assumed to be charities’, in terms of their business structure; they can operate as a limited company. This may simply be the result of being unable to fulfil the criteria of charity status; whether they have charity status or not should not prevent them from not having a safeguarding policy in place.

It was noted by one of the attendees that faith leaders and volunteers struggle with feelings of guilt and despair working with the local community, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues such as immigration. One attendee noted that as part of a faith group, he felt compelled to be able to support others and felt immense pressure in trying to support the local community.

*I’ve very interested in helping churches, and we should be able to say that ‘Yes, it is difficult.’*

Whilst the attendees all believed that immigration services in the UK were ineffective, they acknowledged that the reason some people may not be successful with residency applications is in part due to individuals not providing the same story during their interview, that they wrote in their application form

‘The problem that people do present to faith leaders, is that sometimes they provide crook stories. We need to be careful of the people that approach us, and get to the bottom of what a lot of these people are talking about.’

Some of the attendees expressed a desire for support on a leadership level. When explored further, it was envisioned that this support involved advice and support around how to deal with local issues, and was faith and/or interfaith specific and/or interfaith. None of the attendees knew about local initiatives such as Southwark for Jesus, or the Southwark Multi-faith forum, which provide to Church leaders, and the faith community respectively. All attendees described communication within the faith community as being insufficient, but that the increase in the number of interfaith initiatives in the borough forced greater communication.
Recommendations

1. Faith groups traditionally rely on word of mouth and from their congregations to spread the word about the social action they support in the borough; more work needs to be done on improving media presence, particularly around utilising social media.

2. All the represented faith groups supported individuals from refugee and asylum seeker communities (RAC). Southwark is said to have around 30 organisations that work with a plethora of different RAC groups. Partnerships between faith groups and RAC organisations may help improve the knowledge base that faith groups have, so that they are more equipped to give appropriate and correct information to those who may seek support.

3. Support within the faith community around child and adult safeguarding is a something that is desired by faith groups. The council should therefore look at supporting the faith community in helping with information, advice and training. (clarification around the necessity of faith groups have appropriate safeguarding policy in place.)

4. There is a desire to change the image of being the last resort for social care and welfare in the borough. This change requires the support of committed councillors and MPs, who are willing to take their points seriously. Faith groups need to then understand how to effectively engage with their local MPs and councillors.

5. There is a need for engagement with organisations that are already doing work e.g. Southwark for Jesus is a resource to help support faith leaders in the Christian Church / Multi-Faith Forum / Transform for Jesus.

Next Steps

1. Dissemination of the report to appropriate bodies
2. Engage with Southwark Council to disseminate appropriate information concerning safeguarding to faith groups.
3. Provide information through SouthwarkCAN to faith groups who want to get a better understanding of the political systems
4. Encourage the use of mechanisms that improve communication with the faith community; e.g., Social Media.

For further information and/or support around safeguarding in the Third Sector, please go to http://communitysouthwark.org/resources/safeguarding.
## Appendix of Current Initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Current Initiatives</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bermondsey Central Hall Methodist Church</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td><a href="http://www.slm-bermondsey.org.uk/welcome.htm">http://www.slm-bermondsey.org.uk/welcome.htm</a></td>
<td>South London Mission is the community outreach arm of the church, running: a hostel, accommodating mainly overseas students, and a smaller number of homeless people at Cluny Place House; a food parcel programme, with generous donations from other Methodist churches, denominations, schools and other groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Michael's Eritrean Orthodox Community Church</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td><a href="http://www.debresahl.com">http://www.debresahl.com</a></td>
<td>A mixed group of about 300, mainly Eritreans and Ethiopians. Holds Sunday and prayer services. Gives spiritual and moral support to refugees and asylum seekers. And provides mother tongue Tigrinya education and supplementary education classes to young Eritreans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Hope Church</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td><a href="http://www.cityhope.co.uk/">http://www.cityhope.co.uk/</a></td>
<td>We run Southwark CAP Centre, providing debt advise. Working in partnership with Southwark Foodbank, our members, local people and businesses donate food to people in need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House On The Rock International Church</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td><a href="http://www.hotric.org.uk">http://www.hotric.org.uk</a></td>
<td>The charity shop arm of the church has been running since 2002, and is open to anyone who lives, works or visits the borough, to buy affordable clothes and shoes, and as a place to rest and relax.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim Association of Nigeria</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td><a href="http://www.manuk.org">http://www.manuk.org</a></td>
<td>They have a very active Youth group with activities that includes summer camp; winter camping; Sisters/Brothers Arabic and hadith classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southwark Bahá’í Society</td>
<td>Bahá’í</td>
<td><a href="http://www.southwarkbahais.org.uk/">http://www.southwarkbahais.org.uk/</a></td>
<td>They are engaged in community building in local neighbourhoods and have regular meetings, events and activities open to everyone from any background, culture or religion. We look for and foster what connects communities rather than divides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way of Glory Missions</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td><a href="http://www.wayofglorymissions.org.uk">www.wayofglorymissions.org.uk</a></td>
<td>They run a positive building programme, turning young people's lives around by tackling feelings of isolation. They also offer maths, english language, citizenship, ICT at Level 3 ASDAN qualification level, and crises, money and event management support and training.</td>
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</tbody>
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