

Faith Communities Forum 20/01/2021

Microsoft Teams

Welcome

The Deputy Minister & Chief Whip (DM&CW) spoke of a happier new year and signs of improvement. She thanked forum members for working with their communities and discussing with them opening places of worship (PoW) or not, and helping with risk assessments. There is good news about the vaccination programme, thousands are added every day. People are asking questions, please share them.

The DM noted the following: to mark Interfaith Week I made an oral statement on 17 November and on 12 November took part in a celebratory event arranged by the Interfaith Council of Wales. On 11 November the First Minister took part in Diwali Celebrations organised by the Hindu Council of Britain. Two public Q&A sessions on reopening Places of Worship were held since the last meeting.

The DM&CW wished Archbishop John Davies well on his retirement. In 2020 the Church in Wales celebrated its centenary, while this was overshadowed by the pandemic, pilgrimages will take place in future.

Previous Actions

Action 1: To contact forum members when the Education Minister makes a statement on proposed changes to the curriculum. This is now at the committee stage. We are aware of concerns and are discussing them and considering an amendment regarding SACREs and Agreed Syllabus Conferences.

Actions 2 and 3 are completed.

Gurmit Singh Randhawa has volunteered to represent the FCF on the Race Equality Action Plan (REAP) steering group. Members received a written update on the REAP prior to the meeting.

Update on Places of Worship.

The DM&CW thanked the Task & Finish (T&F) group for its availability and flexibility. The FM has also asked to pass on thanks and wants to hear from the forum also to help us navigate changes.

Paul Webb (PW) said the T&F group has helped WG greatly, directly shaping advice to ministers, and has served the Faith Communities Forum (FCF) well. Issues discussed included baptism and singing. This work has brought different groups together and increased our understanding of each other.

Aled Edwards (AE) thanked officials and said we have worked well to avoid some harm to our communities. He has recommended the Q&A approach to the Vaccination group so that it can engage better with communities and suggested they could use PoW as vaccination centres.

Gurmit said it was great to discuss the context for new legislation, then to bring information back to our communities.

Sakti Guha said there are reports that the Hindu community is reluctant to accept vaccinations but stated there is no concern from Hindus about the content of vaccinations, the only concern is about the supply of vaccines available.

Q&A Session on Thursday 14 January

PW said the Q&A helped people review their PoW's policies and risk assessments. There were concerns around covid-positive people to attend funerals, which is allowed in the guidance. Also concerns around the Church in Wales' duty to conduct funerals, which means ministers can't use discretion to refuse for safety reasons.

ACTION: Officials to respond to the Church in Wales' concerns around the duty to conduct funerals in potentially unsafe conditions.

Archbishop John thanked Paul and said the T&F group and the FCF helps leaders deal with questions within their own communities regarding other communities. A significant number of PoW have closed by choice and those which stay open must thoroughly review their risk assessments.

The DM&CW emphasised the value of the FCF when speaking to Cabinet.

Ceremonies Group update

The DM&CW confirmed that permitted funeral attendance numbers depend on the venue's risk assessment, and social engagements are not allowed.

PW said the situation with weddings is stable, ceremonies are permitted at all levels, only receptions are restricted. Weddings at hotels are currently not permitted, but those at registry offices are. Registrars are concerned about exposure and wondering when they will be vaccinated.

Dane Marsh said funeral guidance is being updated to reflect alert levels. At alert level 4 no wakes are permitted, at lower levels different numbers are permitted. We are checking the legal side.

The DM&CW said it's very important that guidance is updated. We need to clarify with understanding how we can support communities with many bereavements.

Vaccination Programme

The DM&CW said the rollout of the largest programme Wales has ever seen has begun. People may attend a mass vaccination centre, community centre, mobile unit, pharmacy or a GP's office. We are asking people not to contact GPs with queries so that they can focus on their work. We are prioritising vulnerable groups. We hope that faith leaders can offer support and advice to their communities.

There are some moral and ethical concerns as well as questions about the content of the vaccine.

We have an engagement plan to reach out to vulnerable groups and are translating information into many different languages to share.

The DM&CW said one issue is groups or individuals not coming forward if invited.

AE said that concerns may have come from conversations with colleagues in the Race Forum and with the police who are tracking elements of disinformation spread by agents abroad who wish to mislead people, also targeting faith communities.

The DM&CW acknowledged the disinformation being spread.

Dr Sakti Guha has spoken to nurses and said that the amount of vaccinations received is not enough, we have to press the matter and establish whether quantities are being shared equally.

The DM&CW said there are concerns in all communities.

Sian Rees (SR) said she had spoken with Canon Adidege, a member of the Redeemed Church of God. Around 70% of their members do not intend to accept the vaccine. The Evangelical Alliance has published and shared a webinar about the vaccine. Elim has produced a webinar and encouraged takeup of the vaccine. Fr Bernard Sixtus has encouraged Catholic communities. Canon Adidege said we need to see key leaders filmed being vaccinated to reach their communities.

AA said two recent surveys suggest reluctance in BAME communities. The Muslim Council of Wales is about the launch a survey help understand and address this, as well as a series of webinars with medical doctors and scholars in community languages to share accurate information and find where misinformation is coming from. Many would feel safer if their PoW were used as a vaccination centre. 4 mosques in Cardiff and 2 in Newport which have offered their use.

The DM&CW said the FM has raised PoW being used for vaccinations at Cabinet. Is there a specific black-led church which would be suitable as a vaccination centre.

Gurmit Singh Randhawa said minorities are victims of misinformation. Younger people pass on myths to older people. We have hosted webinars and are doing all we can.

The DM&CW said role models are very important, including BAME doctors.

Chris Abbas suggested using television and radio for short education programmes.

The DM&CW invited Eleri Davies (ED) to feed into the meeting:

ED said yesterday we attended a T&F group around the vaccination programme. We can feed the discussions today to our vaccination team.

AE said it may require a small working group of faith leaders to help the vaccination team. Careful conversations are required in addition to simple translations. In Penally some people don't understand the information provided, even in their own languages.

The DM&CW suggested the T&F group and representatives from Health Boards meet. Older people are keenest on the vaccine, younger people may be the concern.

The DM&CW explained that Wales' allowance of the vaccine is based on the Barnett Formula/population level, not on specific need / number of vulnerable people. I want to make sure you all have access to the latest updates.

Rheinallt Thomas said he received the vaccine yesterday.

The Archbishop of Wales mentioned Marcus Rashford and suggested approaching popular people to receiving the vaccine. Also, to echo Chris Abbas, traditional media is very effective and may reach older people.

Surinder Channa asked if we can see more adverts on TV with different faces that could help.

The DM&CW spoke about priority groups.

Black led churches

The DM&CW asked AE and SR to introduce their paper on black-led churches. AE spoke about transparency and feedback. Black-led churches are a growing part of the Christian community, currently represented by AE and SR on the FCF, who are white.

SR said that the proposed group is distinct with diverse opinions and good representatives which will respect other faiths but also have a credible following in Wales. AE emphasised that these churches have a huge following.

The DM&CW said this is pertinent in terms of the REAP and the vaccine and could be considered in the context of the general review of the FCF membership.

Rheinallt Thomas said we must support this.

Chris Abbas agreed that this is long overdue.

The DM&CW asked to meet One Accord before the end of the Senedd term to welcome them, and also said we need to carry out a full review looking at all faiths.

ACTION: Officials to arrange meeting between the DM&CW and the One Accord

AE said the chaplaincy at Penally is working hard and using devices from DPIA to engage and make an assessment of conditions there so that we can feed back.

The DM&CW said she has spoken to the Immigration Minister to say the camp should be closed and the refugees re-housed more suitably. There is no sign that Pembrokeshire Council will grant planning permission so it would have to close in March. Amazing support is being offered to the refugees.

AE said far-right responses got worse last week. Refugees were badly advised to go on their own protest through Tenby which fed into the far-right strategy on social media or physically attending protests. If the Home Office had engaged more with the community they would have been better prepared. Level of toxicity is high.

The DM&CW confirmed the next forum meeting on 3 March.

Dr Meraj Hasan spoke about poor living standards for refugees and the difficulty in raising issues with accommodation/facilities/security.

ACTION: Officials to follow up on poor accommodation standards for refugees.

Transport

The DM&CW introduced the Transport strategy and the issues involved.

Kate Clark gave a presentation on the Transport Strategy.

Abdul-Azim Ahmed (AA) said the issues raised concerns about removing barriers in our communities, we hope for strong delivery and more engagement on a local level.

Meraj Hasan said if service improved more people would use public transport. We love our cars but ought to do the right thing. We don't do enough public education, we should do adverts on using buses, park and ride, cycling etc.

Gethin Rhys said Cytun will submit a full response. It's the details which make a difference to people's lives. A detailed mini-plan should be provided for comment with the consultation. Religious festivals tend to be holidays but buses are often less available on Sundays/Easter/Christmas etc. Public transport is described as "filling the gaps" in the consultation but for many people it is all that is available.

Suzanne Pomeroy talked about the regional and national transport policy plans.

GSR said there should be community hub parking outside of towns 7 days a week.

Meeting ends