

**“Face-To-Face and Side-By-Side”: A Framework For Inter Faith Dialogue and Social Action  
CONSULTATION RESPONSE FORM**

You are welcome to use this form to record any comments or observations you would like to make in response to the consultation document. You can access a copy of the consultation document here: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/interfaithdialogue>

Please note that use of this form is not obligatory – responses are welcome in any format. Responses to this consultation will be used by Government and key partners to develop the framework and to inform plans for implementation. If you do not wish your response to be shared with non-Government partners in this way please make this clear in your response.

Please send your responses by email to: [interfaith@communities.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:interfaith@communities.gsi.gov.uk)

Or by post to:

Towards a framework for inter faith dialogue and social action  
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This consultation closes on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2008.

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This response has been prepared with reference to the Muslim only involvement in inter faith work and will therefore not refer to other inter faith structures involving all other faiths. Within the Muslim involvement we have looked at the MCB affiliates and their involvement in inter faith work. To this end, the Inter Faith Relations Committee of MCB sent out a questionnaire to

all affiliates as part of MCB's initiative to improve the performance and to build the capacity of mosques, imams and institutions. This exercise ties in with the MCB's "100 Mosques Project" which is aimed at helping mosques to improve management and service provision to their communities. We received responses from mosques, Islamic schools, local community centres, charities, institutes and clubs. We received replies locally, regionally and nationally.

The questions we asked revolved around the area of inter faith policies, invitations from other faith organisations to participate in inter faith activities, attitudes and views of members towards inter faith work, support structures and barriers to inter faith work and funding.

**Question 1: Is the balance of structures to facilitate inter faith dialogue and social action at national, regional and local level right?**

A mixed picture is emerging of the level of work, locally, regionally and nationally. As all of the work is done by volunteers, the quality and quantity of inter faith work is not constant and uniform across the country. There are pockets around the country where Muslims are well organised and well linked with the inter faith structures in their vicinity, but on the whole the majority are not. Usually those individuals who are engaged at local level are the ones who are also engaged at national level and so the issue of recruitment of individuals at grass root level is vital in order to improve overall participation.

**Question 2: What more is needed at national, regional and local levels to facilitate inter faith interaction and social action?**

The MCB survey identified the following pressing needs:

- Many respondents stated that their major constraint is the lack of qualified people, particularly with suitable language skills. Thus, a support system for teaching English would be welcomed.
- The availability of appropriate venues to hold meetings can also be a problem.
- Funding for the renting of suitable premises would enable inter faith groups to locate more appropriate venues for their meetings.
- Funding to pay a local coordinator would take away the pressure on already busy individuals to find time to organise meetings and events.
- This paid coordinator could then also ensure that information about events and activities is disseminated appropriately to the communities and their imams and leaders.

Some survey responses:

*“If we had the funds we would employ a good quality outreach worker to build on and strengthen existing inter faith networks. We would develop the worker with training funds and then seek to provide inter faith services to relevant agencies with the aim of becoming financially sustainable” [Islamic centre in Reading]*

*“Lack of suitable venues hinders inter faith work e.g some Hindus and Sikhs do not like to attend functions held at the mosque. A neutral hall or venue would be more useful for regular dialogue with other faith groups” [a London mosque].*

*“We shall employ personnel who have good imam training, inter faith skills and knowledge. We need help with regard to their salary scale and accommodation. We will appreciate any guidance from you [Muslim club in Berkshire].*

Several MCB affiliates also made specific suggestions on how the funding could be used:

*“Youth interaction with scouts and sports groups – male and female [a West Yorkshire mosque]*

*“We would like to encourage youth to mix and have joint functions with other faith groups. Lack of proper venue and meeting place is a major hurdle in advancing good links with other faith groups and community as a whole” [a South London mosque].*

*“Cross cultural musical event; arts show, ‘id mela (carnival) for the whole community” [a Midlands-based Trust]*

*“We would like to organise an exhibition of Islamic art and a food tasting day of food from the Muslim world” [a mosque in Worthing]*

*“We would like to establish a neighbourhood network where important local issues can be discussed openly by community leaders and members of the public belonging to all ethnic and faith backgrounds” [an Islamic faith school]*

**Question 3: Are different approaches required at national, regional and local levels? What might these consist of? What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing?**

In some areas the same approach works at local, regional and national level. Other areas will need adjustments to achieve better results.

#### **Local level**

- People are usually interested in doing some physical work – e.g. fund raising, cleaning up the neighbourhood.

- The linking of schools especially where pupils are predominantly of one particular faith.
- Visits to places of worship by school children and members of the public.

### **Regional Level**

- Islam Awareness weeks at colleges, universities and town halls could be expanded upon.
- Involvement with each others festivals.
- Sports events are already happening locally but could be developed regionally.

### **National level**

- Exhibitions such as Islam Expo which brings together all the diverse cultures of Islam
- Islamic Art exhibitions.
- “Id in the Square” organised by MCB in Trafalgar Square.

### **Question 4: Are there appropriate opportunities in your community and your local area to learn about different faiths and beliefs?**

The MCB survey indicated a positive attitude towards inter faith dialogue both in the desire to engage and also the range of settings that offer opportunities for this engagement (see Tables 1 & 2 below).

***Table 1. Is it your mosque/association’s policy to work with other religious groups?***

	<i>Mosques, Islamic schools &amp; local community centres</i>	<i>Charities, institutes &amp; clubs</i>	<i>Organisations with a national or regional branch structure</i>
<i>No</i>	-	1	-
<i>Yes, but we have not taken any initiatives ourselves</i>	7	3	1
<i>Yes, and we</i>	15	9	6

<i>have launched our own initiatives</i>			
<i>No response</i>	1	-	-

The findings also suggest that mosques in particular may need advice and help so as to be more pro-active – see response to Q2 above (i.e. language skills, ‘neutral’ venue, funding).

**Table 2. Has your mosque/association invited other faith groups to any of the following? (Most respondents had sent invitations for more than one type of event)**

	<i>Mosques, Islamic schools &amp; local community centres</i>	<i>Charities, institutes &amp; clubs</i>	<i>Organisations with a national or regional branch structure</i>
<i>To speak about their faith to your members</i>	5	4	3
<i>To hear a presentation on Islam &amp; ask questions</i>	12	5	7
<i>To a mosque open day/guided tour</i>	5	2	4
<i>To observe madrasah activities/give a talk to students</i>	8	1	2
<i>To an ‘id or other social get-together</i>	13	1	2
<i>To an exhibition of Islamic art or poetry recital</i>	8	2	2
<i>None of the above</i>	4	5	-

The two ‘id celebrations are a popular opportunity for bridge-building. However it is noticeable that when talks or lectures are organised by mosques, these are more often used to present information on Islam rather than learn more about other faiths perspectives. This is an imbalance that will be further investigated by the MCB’s Inter Faith Committee.

**Question 5: How do we improve opportunities for learning about different religions and beliefs and build on existing best practice?**

- Support the existing structures.
- Continue to enhance the RE syllabus in schools.
- Support the work of SACREs.
- Encourage and support the work of Islamic societies in universities and FOSIS.
- Introduce a few key elements of other religions to the madrasah and imam training curriculum.

The MCB survey found that an important role was being fulfilled by inter faith organisations and networks – these were clearly fulfilling the role of ‘trusted brokers’ (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3. Has your mosque/association received an invitation to participate in an event in the last three years? (Most respondents had received invitations from more than one type of host)**

	<i>Mosques, Islamic schools &amp; local community centres</i>	<i>Charities, institutes &amp; clubs</i>	<i>Organisations with a national or regional branch structure</i>
<i>From a mandir, gurdwara or temple</i>	3	2	1
<i>From a church</i>	12	3	4
<i>From a synagogue</i>	4	3	2
<i>From an inter faith organisation/network</i>	19	8	8
<i>From none of the above</i>	3	4	

**Question 6: How best can different faith communities work together whilst retaining their distinctiveness?**

The MCB’s vision is of a multi-faith, pluralistic society with a conscious policy of recognising that people’s cultural and faith identities are not merely a private matter, but ones that carry public implications. We support Professor Parekh’s definition of a multicultural society as one that respects all cultures and which values cultural diversity “as a part of its own self-understanding” (Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism, 2006).

**Question 7: How can the lessons learned and experience gained from inter faith dialogue and social action help to build relationships with people from different communities more widely?**

Emphasis should be put on the commonalities between faiths and shared universal human values.

The Tablet magazine recently illustrated the point in a reference to Ramadan: "In a multicultural society, community relations are not fostered by the suppression of difference but by the celebration of goodwill... Catholicism received an injection of devotional inspiration from Islam in the Middle Ages, for which it has every reason to be eternally grateful, and it is to Muslims that Catholics can turn now for inspiration in the value of fasting" [Editorial, 4<sup>th</sup> March 2006].

**Question 8: What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing in building understanding about different beliefs and practices?**

- Please refer to questions 3 and 5.
- In addition media agencies could help in the sharing of religious information to help educate the nation.
- Training could be given to the various faith communities in media skills, public speaking and writing skills, as well as event organisation skills.

**Question 9: What spaces are being used by faith communities for inter faith dialogue and social action?**

Community centres, educational establishment and church halls are the most likely venues. It is very rare to find mosques used as venues unless they have a separate community hall attached.

**Question 10: What barriers are there to sharing spaces?**

- Mosques are heavily used every day at prayer times and in the evenings for madrasah classes.
- Only a few of them are purpose built and they may have a room or two to spare.
- The large majority of mosques are renovated or improvised structures.
- Some mosques and Mosque Committees have gender issues and do not open their doors to women.
- Lack of observance of particular dietary laws or requirements can also sometimes be a barrier.

**Question 11: What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing to create shared spaces?**

Community centres, schools and council buildings should be encouraged to open up their doors at subsidised rates.

**Question 12: Access to funding, leadership skills, and misconceptions about the role of faith in public life have all been recognised as issues which can limit the ability of faith communities to bridge and link. Are there other barriers in your community or local area which need to be overcome? Who needs to take action, and what do they need to do?**

One respondent said

*“If we had the funds we would employ a good quality outreach worker to build on and strengthen existing inter faith networks. We would develop the worker with training funds and then seek to provide services to relevant agencies with the aim of becoming financially sustainable”.*

There are some people who believe that theological arguments against inter faith work have some grounding. Imams and scholars need to educate the community about the permissibility and benefits of getting involved in inter faith work.

**Question 13: To what extent does inter faith social action in your local area enable you to work side by side with people who have no religious belief? How might social action involving faith communities and wider civil society be increased and strengthened?**

Most religious communities work in secular organisations and there is therefore already contact between people of faith and those with no religious beliefs. This contact can be enriched through joint humanitarian relief work, joint sports activities and joint work on environmental issues etc.

**Question 14: What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing to increase the level and scope of inter faith social action?**

There is a need to recognise the important role currently served by independent inter faith organisations and networks and build on this success.

**Question 15: How are you promoting and encouraging inter faith activity and sharing best practice? What are the best ways of encouraging more people to take part? What role might Government play to champion this?**

- MCB is highlighting inter faith activity through its “100 Mosques Project”.

- The MCB Inter Faith Relations Committee is advising FOSIS and Islamic Societies nationally on inter faith matters and has jointly prepared an inter faith guide with FOSIS.
- MCB have held four regional seminars in Preston, Birmingham London and Bradford in which inter faith work and its importance was highlighted.
- MCB works with the following – Inter Faith Network UK, Muslim Christian Muslim Forum, Three Faiths Forum, Council of Christians and Jews, Alif Aleph UK and many others.
- Internationally MCB is engaged with World Council of Religions for Peace, The European Council of Religious Leaders, Imams and Rabbis for Peace, The Doha Conference and others.
- The work of affiliates such as Islam Expo contributes to better understanding of Islam and the removal of stereotypes.

**Question 16: How might the barriers experienced by women be overcome?**

Through the “100 Mosques Project”, attempts are being made to increase sensitivity and awareness within mosque leaderships, mosque management committees and imams. It is a process of gradual, patient education and offering good role models e.g. the East London Mosque now has two women on its seventeen-person management committee. Similarly the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre in West London employs women staff.

**Question 17: What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society in overcoming these?**

Refer to previous answer

**Question 18: How might the barriers experienced by young people be overcome?**

Refer to Question 16.

Our survey has identified a range of youth activities which could be undertaken, given funding and capacity e.g. scout groups, visits to places of worship, sports activities, celebration of festivals, art shows.

Moreover, mosques need to assure young people that so long as their activities remain within the law, they have freedom of expression with respect to their political views and concerns. In the current climate there is suspicion that mosques are monitored and under surveillance, which does not help in promoting youth engagement.

**Question 19: What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society in overcoming these?**

From the survey, it appears that full-time Muslim schools can play an important role in establishing bridges. Moreover events such as Islam Expo provide an opportunity for school trips and youth participation in workshops and other activities.

**Question 20: What can successful existing approaches tell us about the key building blocks needed for inter faith dialogue and social action?**

The successful approaches demonstrate that there is a will on the part of religious communities to engage and work together. They also show that sensitivity, patience, appreciation and support result in more structured and fruitful encounters. We need to:

- Build on the success and good practice tackle the barriers sensitively and with patience.
- Use diverse approaches and be flexible.
- Avoid “one size fits all” approach.
- Ensure parties feel that they are equals and are on equal playing fields.