

THE MAYOR AND

Faith

ACTION PLAN

FAITH IN THE WEST MIDLANDS



WEST MIDLANDS
COMBINED AUTHORITY

MAYOR OF THE
WEST MIDLANDS



Preface: Mayor Andy Street

As part of the ten pledges for my first one hundred days in office as Mayor of the West Midlands, I made a commitment to assemble as many of the faith leaders and religious community groups in the region as possible at a Mayor and Faith Conference so that we could discuss the issues that are of shared importance to us, and to agree how we can work together for a better West Midlands.

On the campaign trail, and after becoming Mayor, I have visited many faith groups and places of worship across the region. It is hugely important for me to learn about your faith and to support your communities.

The first ever Mayor and Faith Conference was an opportunity for us to think together more strategically, and an opportunity for faith communities to help shape my top priorities for working with communities right across the region.

I was thrilled by the overwhelming response to the Conference. We were considerably oversubscribed and live-streamed the event for those not able to be present.

There is no doubt that our faith communities and faith-based charities form one of the greatest - and often under-appreciated - sources of strength, vitality and resilience in our area. The region's faith communities are part of the West Midlands we call home, but are also one of the many ways that the West Midlands is connected to the world.

I want to listen, support and discuss how we can work together, and at the Conference we discussed some of the most important challenges that we face as a society:

- Building leadership and capability - to nurture a new generation for service and impact.
- Combatting homelessness - to support those most in need.
- Reducing hate crime - to keep our communities safer and stronger.
- Unlocking new economic and social value - to provide the jobs, networks, opportunities, hopes and purpose we all seek and share.

In response to the discussions at the Conference and the feedback following it, I am delighted to present my Mayor and Faith Action Plan. I hope that it will form the basis for strong collaboration between the Mayor's Office, the West Midlands Combined Authority and faith groups here in the West Midlands.

The Mayor and Faith Conference was just the beginning of the conversation, and I look forward to working with you to restore pride in the West Midlands.

Andy Street

Mayor of the West Midlands

Thanks and acknowledgements

The Mayor would like to offer his thanks to all the members of the Mayor and Faith Conference steering group: Sinivachin Bachin, Steve Botham, Sumaira Farrukh, Ali Fazel, Guy Hordern, Pastor Jackson, Harbans Lal, Martin Levermore, Beverley Lindsay, Hitesh Kukadia, Asha Masih, Ashvin Patel, Minu Sungu, Andrew Smith, Faeza Vaid, and Benita Wishart. This team of dedicated individuals met eleven times between July and November 2017 to help to organise and shape the summit.

In particular, the Mayor would like to thank the co-chairs of the steering group, Professor Francis Davis of the University of Birmingham and Amrick Singh Ubhi of the Nishkam Centre for their advice, organisation and hosting of the conference, and support in compiling this report.

The Mayor would like to thank the Edward Cadbury Centre, the University of Birmingham, the Westhill Trust and Newman University for their financial and volunteering support which were instrumental in making the Conference happen.

Part 1: The Mayor's Commitment to Collaborate with Faith Communities

When running for Mayor, Andy Street set out his Renewal Plan for the West Midlands, with his priorities and plans for restoring pride in the region. The focus of those commitments was in the areas where the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Mayor have significant powers or responsibilities.

Transport, housing, skills and economic development are all important pillars of driving prosperity and well-being for the people of the West Midlands. But the Mayor's Renewal Plan also sets out his aspiration to work with a variety of institutions/organisations across a range of sectors. In particular, the Mayor emphasised the importance of including - and even championing - he unique perspectives and responsibilities of faith communities and faith-based organisations to achieve shared goals.

The Mayor recognised that these communities and organisations were integral to the social strength and civic success of the region, owing to their reach, capacity and dedication to addressing many pressing social needs. It is hoped that by shaping a more coherent approach to engaging with people of faith, this will foster a wider ethic of spirituality, service and hope, which can only add to the region's existing strengths.

“As well as working with councils, the Mayor will need to work with schools, universities, hospitals, businesses, trade unions, RELIGIOUS GROUPS, community groups, charities and many other West Midlands people. We need a person who can work with all these people, get them on side and get things done”

In his first months in office, the Mayor spent time visiting faith communities and places of worship listening to and understanding the issues which are important to people of faith. In addition to these visits he has run a programme of civic engagement with faith communities, including events such as Diwali on the Square in Birmingham’s Victoria Square, and a Mayoral Eid and Vaisakhi reception.

“The Faith Conference will be a unique gathering, a chance to meet like-minded friends and provide an opportunity for the faith community to help shape my priorities for beginning to work with communities right across the region”



Part 2: Towards a Faith Summit

The Mayor and Faith Conference Steering Group

In July 2017, the Mayor established a steering group to consult, design and deliver on his manifesto pledge to hold a Faith Conference that would agree priorities for the Mayor in relation to community relations and integration. The group comprised eighteen individuals from across the West Midlands from a range of different faith communities. The steering group was convened by two co-chairs, Amrick Singh Ubhi from the Nishkam Centre, and Professor Francis Davis from the University of Birmingham. The group worked through the details of organising the Conference, including agreeing a number of principles, focus areas and methods to guide the event:

Agreed Principles

- To encourage resilient and strong communities and institutions.
- To cherish and promote the skills, talents and contribution of people of faith, faith communities and faith-based organisations across the region and beyond.
- To champion the current action and future potential for faith communities, faith-based organisations and people of faith to work independently and in collaboration with all those of goodwill, in order to address the pressing social and economic challenges of the region and unlock all of its gifts.
- To recognise all of our people: old, young, rich, poor, weak and strong - and to innovate the way we think, talk and mobilise our values, people, buildings, and resources.
- To affirm the spiritual dimensions of life and the innate value and human dignity of every citizen of the West Midlands.





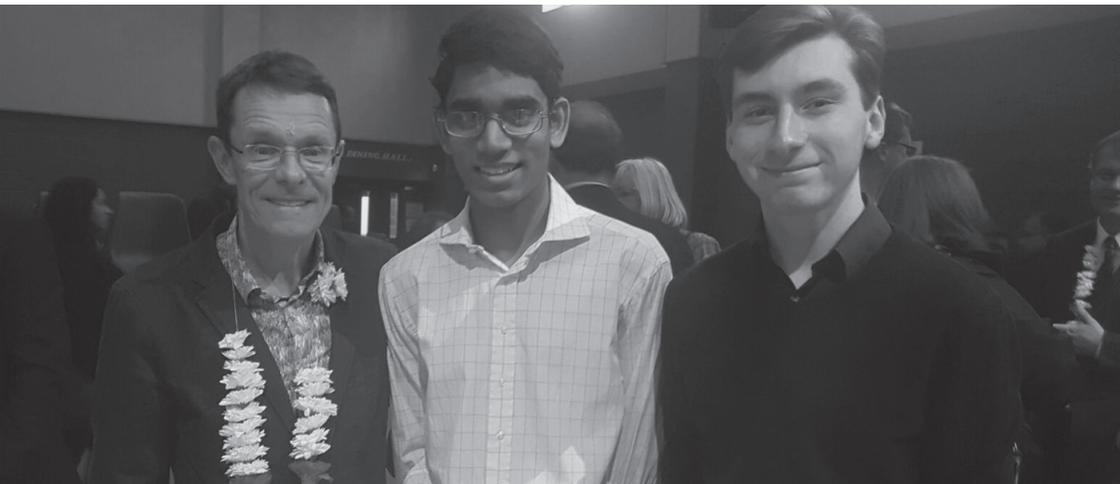
Agreed Focus Areas

The group agreed a number of areas which were both of interest to faith communities and which were relevant to the Mayor's role, responsibilities and manifesto commitments.

- Building leadership and capability – to nurture a new generation for service and impact.
- Combatting homelessness – to recover the talent in our midst.
- Reducing hate crime – to keep our communities safer and stronger.
- Unlocking new economic and social value – to provide the jobs, networks, opportunities, hopes and purpose we all seek and share.

Agreed Methods

- We invite participants to be bold and offer their valuable input on how we build concrete actions and plans to feed into our focus areas.
- We would be excited to hear about any talent and time you have to help and put us in touch with others that you think have something vital to offer.
- For those who would like to support, but are unable to attend the evening, we will be sending out a web survey.
- We want to stay in touch and keep you involved and learn as we go.
- We do not just want to talk. This is a two-way engagement and from this event we will publish a report that represents the overall experiences and opinions of those present.



Part 3: Listening to Faith Communities: A Summary of the Mayor and Faith Conference

On 27th November 2017, over four hundred citizens from across the West Midlands gathered in the Great Hall at the University of Birmingham. The event was also streamed live across the internet. Following the event, social media traffic was high, with over 24,000 impressions on Twitter. More than half the time was set aside for community feedback in response to the focus areas identified by the steering group. Participants also had the opportunity to record additional ideas on feedback forms, ideas boards and cards distributed throughout the evening.

The Mayor's Ask and Offer

Andy Street opened the Conference setting out his commitment to engaging with faith communities, and some of the ways in which he had already done so since his election in May 2017. He gave context of the work that the Mayor and the West Midlands Combined Authority was already planning, which could incorporate the findings of the Conference, for example:

- Mayor's Community Weekend
- Mayor's Mentors Scheme
- West Midlands Leadership Commission

The Mayor reinforced his desire to listen and learn from the various insights and experiences of people in the room and encouraged everyone to get involved in the conversation. After initial feedback from tables, participants moved to smaller consultation sessions focused on the priority policy areas identified by the steering group. These were:

- Economy
- Homelessness
- Hate crime
- Leadership

The following notes summarise the discussions which happened at the Conference and subsequent feedback provided by participants. The points below do not represent the policy or views of the WMCA or the Mayor, but are a record of the views of the participants in the Mayor and Faith Conference.

“ We must support the next generation through education and raising their aspirations. ”

Economy

Led by Rt. Rev. David Urquhart, Bishop of Birmingham

- The discussions around economic opportunity and security were placed in a wider context of community cohesion, i.e. greater opportunity and security is considered indispensable to cohesion.
- Religious/faith communities have a unique perspective and approach to poverty, rooted in a theology of compassion, justice and prophecy. In light of this, the poor and the vulnerable in our society are not viewed merely as a ‘liability to be managed’, but rather as dignified, autonomous beings full of potential. Likewise, material wealth is not necessarily the only measurement of the flourishing and prosperity of any given person, community or region. In other words, “it’s not all about money, money, money!”
- Naming, researching, recording and championing of the civic contribution of the region’s faith communities is essential, but this must record all of that contribution and not just traditional economic measures such as GVA.
- Religious/faith communities may not be ‘economy literate’, but they do have some financial capital and more importantly, a wealth of experience organising and delivering activity. The social capital and soft skills within religious/faith institutions need to be utilised more effectively in an upstream approach to improving the economy, for example, through education or upskilling.
- However, it must be made clear that religious/faith communities should not be exploited in order to fill a gap where the State fails to provide opportunity. It is about national policy and local action reflecting, working with and complementing each other.
- There is a responsibility upon all people of faith to not shy away from speaking out against or lobbying for better policy and political action to create a more equal society that facilitates opportunity for all.

Homelessness

Led by Steve Philpott, St. Basil's and the Mayor's Homelessness Taskforce

- Homelessness was acknowledged as an ever-growing and pressing issue not just for the region but also for the country at large.
- As representatives at a grass roots level, religious/faith communities have insight into the real impact of homelessness on individuals and the link between this and other societal issues such as crime, drug/alcohol abuse. There was a consensus that addressing homelessness will help reduce these other harms.
- Faith/religious institutions can and do provide the space to support the homeless and the vulnerable. This derives from an ethic that emphasises the call or duty to help those in need. However, other opportunities to innovate unused space should also be explored.
- Whilst undoubtedly there is intrinsic value to existing faith-based charities and projects that help the homeless, it is important to also focus our attention towards systemic change. The increase of homelessness over the last seven years appears to be symptomatic of wider governmental reforms in relation to welfare cuts and affordable housing.



Hate Crime and Inter-Community Tensions

Led by David Jamieson, Police and Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands

- There is genuine concern within communities that Brexit has reinforced xenophobic attitudes and behaviours that have contributed to a rise in hate crime.
- Religious education in schools needs to be addressed, particularly where children may be exposed to potentially harmful ideologies, but also more generally to give young people the knowledge and skills to live amongst diversity. Ensuring that schools are mixed will also go a long way to reduce the ignorance that can lead to hostility.
- Can we develop a “West Midlands curriculum” that reflects and nurtures the strengths and the needs of our diverse region?
- When talking about ‘who’ or which communities are affected by hate crime, the Sikh community feels it is often overlooked and has not been sufficiently addressed. However, hate crime is not an issue that is exclusive to one community, rather it affects all; this should be reflected in our discourse and action.
- It seems to be the case that communities are working in silos to tackle this issue. Would it not be more productive if we addressed this issue collaboratively? This would reinforce commonality and solidarity between separated communities.
- Can there be an incentive for communities to work together? For example, a “Cohesion Prize” or a “Young Changemakers Summit”.
- It is not always useful or even relevant to highlight the shortcomings of community mixing within the region. We need to accept that it is reasonable for communities to gravitate towards familiarity and huddle. Rather than being fixated on literal ‘mixing’, we need to consider a more meaningful way to measure cohesion.
- We need to review and adjust our language to talk about our diverse communities more accurately and meaningfully. For example, the word ‘Asian’ is often a generic term used to cover a whole community, but fails to pick up on the geographical, cultural social and religious nuances of this group.
- How do we engage smaller faith communities, such as Pagans, Zoroastrians and Bahai, particularly when they are overlooked or taken less seriously by others?
- We should direct more of our attention towards strengthening inter-generational engagement (between the old and young) within communities.
- The impact of terrorism on communities is not as great as drugs and homelessness. It would be useful to address this in our discourse and offer proportional responses.
- The Birmingham City Council held a “Community Cohesion” summit in December 2017. How can we encourage all WMCA councils to do this?



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RECOGNISE THE WHOLE
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Leadership

Led by Anita Bhalla, Chair of the West Midlands Leadership Commission

- There seems to be a reluctance or scepticism towards people of faith having power in society.
- Religious/faith communities acknowledge that there are challenges around leadership within religious institutions (in particular, female leadership positions). However, this is not unique to them.
- We all have a responsibility – both people of faith and those not – to seriously address discrimination of all types (be it gender/sexuality/ethnicity/disability/faith) within leadership roles.
- In what ways can religious/faith communities help create better leaders? Training a leader for a place of worship is different to training leaders for the workplace. Can religious/faith communities help individuals cultivate the ‘values’ necessary for leadership positions?
- The West Midlands has a number of world leading companies and the WMCA should lead the way on promoting diversity within these.
- Can we create a WMCA role model scheme with a representative from every community, to inspire and promote diverse leadership?
- A wider strategy might involve faith groups getting together to lobby for Government funding for youth leadership programmes.



Engagement with Faith Communities

- “Tonight should not be the end” and that some kind of structure was needed to support faith engagement with the WMCA and the Mayor.
- More work needed to be done to engage, involve and unlock the Local Authorities that make up the WMCA.
- More effort should be made to ensure the representation of all faith communities across the West Midlands, in particular further engagement with the Muslim communities in the region.
- Concerns were raised by the Hindu community and others that they felt sidelined and at risk from other communities.
- There are more issues which are important to faith groups than the four priority themes, and there should be further opportunity for discussion and action with the Mayor in the future.
- We need to be conscious that opportunities such as this conference are not just to gather a critical mass of people, but actually facilitate meaningful and constructive decision-making informed by people of faith.
- We need to reflect more on what is distinctive about ‘faith’ and ‘faiths’ in the context of public policy making and action. Perhaps this necessitates a written statement to guide people of faith in this work.
- Realistically, linking all faith communities/groups across the whole of the West Midlands will be a challenge. It is perhaps more efficient to coordinate the work within local authorities. The Mayor should create a common platform with information, resources and networks flowing from local authorities for people from anywhere in the region to tap into.
- Local faith communities have the confidence of knowing their local communities very well. The action that they take on a local level is a response to this. We need to think about how we can develop a strategy for effectively communicating the reality of these insights to local authorities and at a regional and national level.

“ Faith drives profound and committed action...
you need to let faiths lead ”



Part 4: The Mayor and Faith Action Plan

A) Engagement with Faith Communities

1. Continue a programme of Mayoral civic events to celebrate religious festivals e.g. Eid Reception, Diwali on the Square and celebrations for other faith groups with the support of that community.
2. Continue the ongoing programme of Mayor's visits to faith groups and places of worship.
3. Invite faith communities to form a West Midlands Community Forum to engage with the Mayor on faith issues, including educating the wider community on the role and responsibilities of the Mayor, and providing an opportunity for groups to raise issues which may need mayoral support to lobby Government. This would build on existing groups where possible.
4. Review Mayoral & WMCA Taskforces to ensure the appropriate faith involvement e.g. Homelessness Taskforce, Social Economy Taskforce, Leadership Commission.

B) Specific Actions in Response to Faith Conference Topics

HATE CRIME AND INTER-COMMUNITY TENSIONS

5. Host a Mayoral Round Table on hate crime, to explore the issue in detail, including online hate crime and social media, particularly for young people. This round table will also explore how effective current reporting methods are.
6. With the Police and Crime Commissioner, agree West Midlands actions, potentially including a schools and faith programme and anti-hate crime marketing and awareness campaign (similar to the "Kick it Out" anti-racism campaign in football started in the 1990s). Given the Mayor's transport brief, this would focus especially on hate crime on public transport.

THROUGH THE HOMELESSNESS TASKFORCE

7. Work through the Homelessness Taskforce to design and offer targeted support activities to homeless people or those at risk of homelessness at all stages of prevention, crisis and recovery. Focus activity on gaps in homelessness provision in certain areas or amongst certain groups, for example, those with no recourse to public funds.
8. Involve faith groups in the Change Into Action alternative giving scheme, providing personalised support for rough sleepers, and an alternative to street giving for the people of the West Midlands (currently in Birmingham, with the potential to be rolled out across other local authorities).
9. Promote best practice by faith organisations along the homelessness pathway, drawing out practical examples of how the faith community in the West Midlands are working on everything from prevention to recovery, with a view to providing ideas and practical advice for those who want to help, but are not sure how.

FAITH AND THE ECONOMY

10. Explore new financial models like a “Community Bond”, and to implement existing models like social impact bonds, through the Social Economy Taskforce.
11. Map the economic and social contribution of faith groups in the West Midlands, building on previous work such as the 2005 “Believing in the Region” report. It is important that we measure whole contribution, not just GDP or GVA.
12. Offer faith communities the opportunity to bid for any social programmes tendered by the WMCA, such as skills contracts.

LEADERSHIP

13. Roll out Mayor’s Mentors programme for young people aged 14-25 with faith groups, with a new activity focused on mentoring in and around places of worship.
14. Contribute to the findings and action plan of the West Midlands Leadership Commission, examining the reasons that the leadership of the region does not reflect the people who live here, and proposing practical ways to change it.
15. Work with West Midlands universities to create a leadership programme for young and emerging leaders from the faith communities, the Young Changemakers Academy, with a summit event to kick off this work.

C) Further Areas of Activity

CELEBRATING FAITH CONTRIBUTIONS

16. Award Mayor's Community Prizes for contribution to community cohesion in the West Midlands by an individual or organisation (e.g. inter-faith, inter-generational, cross-regional, social mobility, lifetime achievement award).
17. Publish a research report into best practice examples of faith communities working with Mayors and public authorities around the world.

SUPPORTING OTHER WEST MIDLANDS ACTIVITIES

18. Social action and community-building events to bring West Midlands communities together, e.g. Mayor's Community Weekend, with faith groups participating and supporting in organising efforts.
19. Encourage the UK City of Culture 2021 in Coventry, and the Commonwealth Games 2022 in Birmingham to integrate with faith communities in development and volunteering programmes.
20. Support local authorities in the West Midlands in their engagement with faith communities, and ensure any new West Midlands activity complements their existing work.

We will seek to work with existing groups and organisations in the West Midlands e.g. interfaith networks, established groups who have expertise in these areas, associations bringing together people of different nationalities, and many other groups, as we build a region which values all communities and enables them to flourish.





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