

All faith group **Engagement Strategy**

Towards increased access to and engagement with support providers and services by faith-based voluntary organisations in the West Midlands



FUNDED



KEY AIMS OF THE WEST MIDLANDS FAITHS FORUM

1. To interface with regional agencies delivering government policies in the West Midlands and advise them on the impact of such agendas on faith communities.
2. To facilitate discussion between and research among faith communities on matters of social and religious concern.
3. To help build the capacity of faith communities to engage with policy-makers and service providers at local, sub-regional and regional levels and to act as their advocate.
4. To encourage community cohesion both through interfaith dialogue and discussion with the wider public.

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Introduction

This engagement strategy has been developed as a tool to help infrastructure support organisations (hereafter called 'support providers'), ChangeUp Consortia and other organisations supporting the voluntary and community sector, to develop more responsive services. In particular, this paper outlines strategies to improve the support offered to faith-based voluntary and community organisations (VCOs).

The research was commissioned by the West Midlands Faiths Forum (WMFF) as part of the CapacityBuilders Improving Reach Pilot Programme, with a view to informing equality and diversity mainstreaming agendas within ChangeUp Consortia Infrastructure Investment Plans (IIPs).

The strategy includes:

Context

- Why the need for an engagement strategy?
- Why engage with faith based VCOs?
- Levels of faith group engagement in the West Midlands

Engaging with faith-based VCOs

- Some useful definitions
- Examples of good practice in the region
- Typical challenges of engaging with faith-based VCOs

Towards an inclusive engagement strategy

Recommendations for developing better engagement practice (for 3 main types of organisation: support providers, funding bodies and frontline organisations).

About ChangeUp

ChangeUp is a programme of capacity building for the infrastructure of the voluntary and community sector, developed in partnership with the sector. The aim of ChangeUp investment is to catalyse the modernisation of infrastructure provision (e.g. support services delivered by support providers) in order to improve its sustainability, quality and reach. Led by sector expertise, the Capacitybuilders agency (a non-departmental public body) manages ChangeUp. Improving Reach is a pilot ChangeUp programme that contributes to ensuring equal access for all third sector organisations (including particularly marginalised groups) to mainstream support services.

www.capacitybuilders.org.uk



The context

Why the need for an engagement strategy?

As the voluntary and community sector becomes more diverse, support providers and ChangeUp Consortia are under increasing pressure to ensure that the support they provide reaches a wide audience. This is partly a matter of survival, ensuring that their services respond to a rapidly changing market place. But also, regulation of the sector is increasing and support providers are often asked to demonstrate the equality implications of their service provision.

The recent consultation by Capacitybuilders on its seven-year strategic priorities – set out in the document Destination 2014 – has highlighted a number of concerns regarding faith organisations' access to infrastructure support¹ and the limited success of consortia in meeting their stated goals of inclusion and diversity. This emphasises the importance of establishing equitable engagement strategies across the entire spectrum of the third sector, to ensure better and more effective involvement of those such as faith-based organisations in the ChangeUp process.

In the West Midlands there are a significant number of faith-based VCOs working to support local

communities (see Believing in The Region, RAWM, 2006). Yet, many faith-based VCOs either do not know about, or are not able to make best use of, the services available through support providers. A lack of resources, information and time to find and make use of support services compounds this situation and consequently restricts their developmental potential. This is not unique to faith-based organisations and is a problem that is encountered by many from within the third sector. By improving the level and quality of engagement between support providers and the VCOs they serve, support providers will be in a better position to identify the needs of those organisations.

But not all VCOs have found it easy to influence what support services are available to them. In the case of faith VCOs, there are a number of reasons for this. For example, faith VCOs tend to be smaller. Also 'faith' and 'religion' are emotive subjects and this can sometimes stifle open and honest debate about what faith-based VCOs need in terms of infrastructure support. With this in mind, **brap** have produced this strategy on behalf of the West Midlands Faiths Forum to encourage more responsive patterns of engagement between support providers and smaller frontline organisations in the region (including faith-based organisations).

1. 'Infrastructure support' refers to the support and development assistance provided by 'second tier organisations' which is intended to help strengthen the performance and sustainability of frontline organisations. CapacityBuilders have recently introduced the terms 'Support Providers' and 'Support Services' to refer to infrastructure support.



Why engage with faith-based organisations?

Firstly, there has been growing interest in recent years, both in the UK and elsewhere, regarding the role of religious and faith-based groups in public policy. More recently, there has also been increasing interest in the potential for faith-based groups and other third sector organisations to play a part in public service delivery².

With this added involvement will come significantly greater external regulation and increasing demands for faith-based VCOs to show the impact they are making if they are to survive in a competitive market-place. Faith-based VCOs then represent a significant market for infrastructure support providers, but our research has found that few engage with larger VCOs to tell them the kind of support they require and how they would like to access it.

Secondly, heightened public religiosity seems to be prompting a greater self-identification with religion and this is echoed in the Government's increased emphasis on religion as a way of defining certain groups and communities. The 2001 Census saw the inclusion of a voluntary religion question for

the first time, which formally established a new constituency of faith communities in modern Britain.

Thirdly, representative and consultative structures at the national, regional and local levels tend to be predicated increasingly on the view that faith groups can and should be regarded as a distinct and organised sub-sector within the wider voluntary and community sector and within civil society more generally. While there are some who would question this view, there is at least some historical justification for regarding religious groups as a recognised sub-set, given the long-established presence of faith-based voluntary organisations at a grassroots level. We are, for example, all familiar with social welfare initiatives – luncheon clubs, elderly visiting and befriending, day care centres, hostels for the homeless and so forth – which while not in themselves religious activities or intended solely for religious beneficiaries, are provided by projects affiliated to or operating as part of specific churches, temples, mosques or other places of worship.

Fourthly, the establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), following the Equalities Act 2006, has introduced a religion and belief dimension to equalities legislation for the

2. See 'Working Together', Home Office (2004) and 'Working with the Third Sector', National Audit Office (2005) at www.nao.org.uk/pn/05-06/050675.htm



first time. Support organisations providing services to frontline VCOs will need to demonstrate that they are meeting their duties in this regard. Yet, unlike the other established equality strands – race, disability, and gender, for example, there is relatively little available evidence about the level and nature of religious discrimination experienced by individuals and groups. This can make it harder for organisations to identify when people are being discriminated on the basis of their religion or belief. It can also make it harder to identify examples of good practice when engaging with faith or belief-based organisations.

Some of these issues, particularly the increasing role of faith-based VCOs as public service deliverers, are not unique to the faith-based sector. They are part and parcel of the present transformation and professionalisation of the broader third sector. However, developing the kind of support services and organisational processes – which are necessary in order to be part of this transformation – may pose particular challenges for smaller frontline organisations (of which faith-based VCOs are one type).

In order to be clearer about whether faith-based VCOs are currently finding ways to influence the

type of infrastructure support that is provided in the West Midlands, **brap** undertook some initial research to map levels of engagement.

What is the level of engagement today in the West Midlands?

Our research has shown that levels of engagement with funding bodies and support providers (including ChangeUp Consortia) is relatively low for faith-based VCOs. Here we summarise what we found in the West Midlands:

Local Strategic Partnerships

- Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) exist in all areas and are single non-statutory, multi-agency bodies that bring together the public, private and voluntary and community sectors. At present, their engagement with faith communities and faith-based organisations is relatively limited.
- Birmingham Strategic Partnership (BSP) has recently moved towards a more commissioning-based role,



managing Birmingham's Local Area Agreement (LAA). At present, whilst there is some faith representation on the BSP, there is none on any of the thematic boards.

- The Coventry Partnership has no explicit representation on its Board or thematic partnerships.
- The Shropshire Partnership is chaired by the Bishop of Shrewsbury, who in his role as Bishop also sits on the Shropshire Partnership Public Services Board, an equalities forum.

Regional bodies

Government Offices

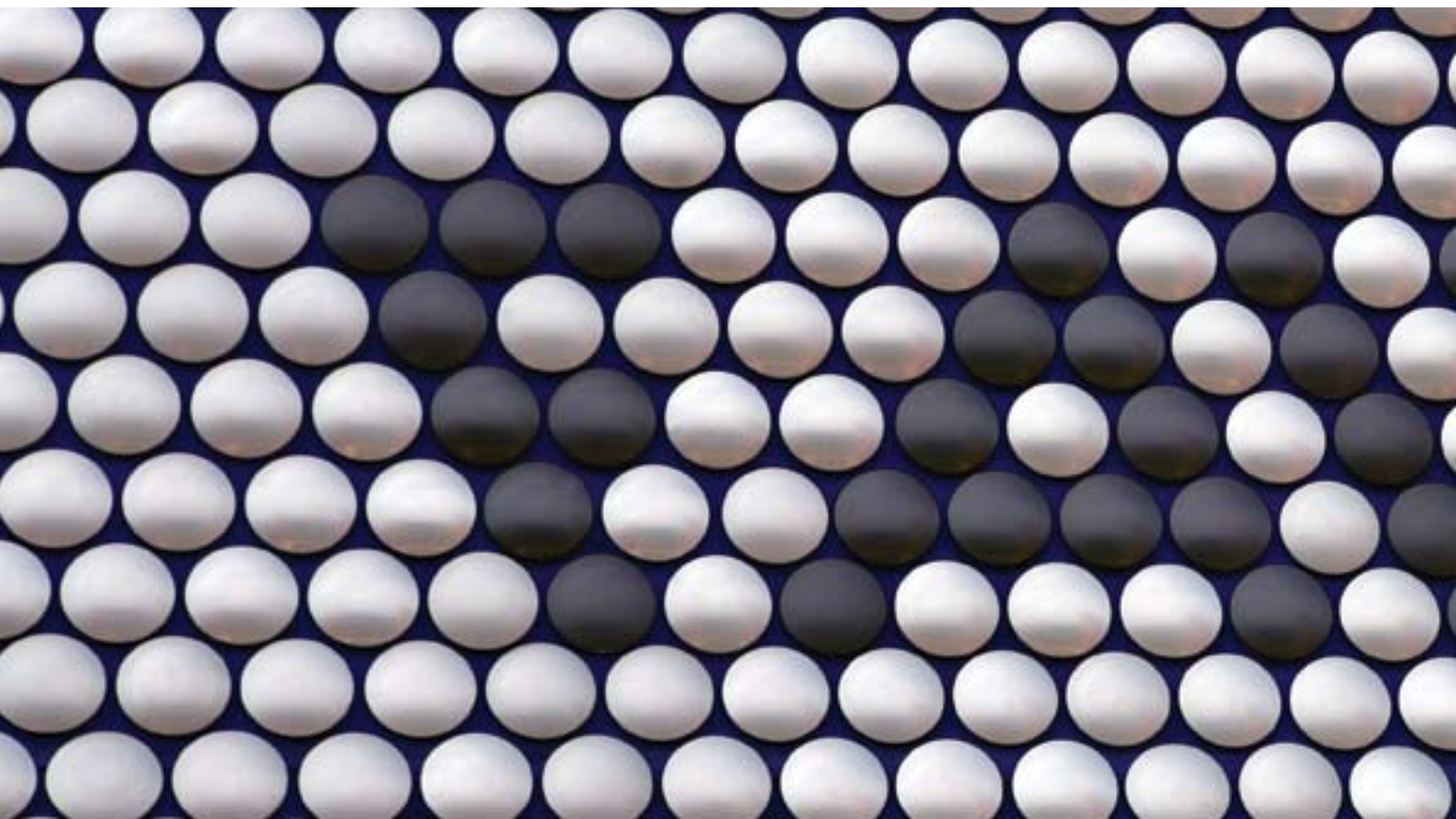
- Government Offices represent central Government in the English regions, and are concerned with the 'community cohesion and faith' agenda through their relationships with inter-faith networks rather than specific individual faith-based organisations or faith communities.
- In the West Midlands, faith organisations are seen as part of improving general consultation on policy issues with the voluntary and community sector. The Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) has strong links with WMFF and has provided some resources for specific engagement activity.

Regional Assemblies

- Regional Assemblies are partnership bodies that are not directly elected where their membership is appointed from amongst elected local authority members and a range of other statutory, voluntary and private sector partners.
- West Midlands Regional Assembly has a faith representative who relays information to the 'faith sector' and advocates on its behalf. West Midlands Faith Forum is included in the membership of appropriate regional structures (for example the West Midlands' Equality and Diversity Partnership).

Regional Development Agencies

- Regional Development Agencies aim to provide effective, co-ordinated regional economic development to underpin regeneration and enable the English regions to improve their competitiveness.
- While all RDAs are keen to improve their engagement with faith communities – especially those that have previously been excluded – they tend not to see direct engagement as their responsibility and look to the voluntary and community sector. In the West Midlands, faith-based organisations that



are not already actively engaged members of larger intermediary organisations (such as inter-faith networks) find it difficult to engage directly with Advantage West Midlands (AWM). It should be noted that AWM (working with GOWM, Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) and the Regional Assembly) supported a Regional Strategic Engagement Fund grant (2003-2006) that enabled thematic networks (including WMFF) to be established in the region. The loss of this funding has had a detrimental effect on the development of effective and inclusive consultation structures for the VCS.

ChangeUp & Infrastructure Investment Plans

The West Midlands region has developed 9 geographically based Consortia in addition to 9 thematic (region-wide) Consortia addressing a range of crosscutting agendas (see West Midlands: The 2007 Consortia Directory at 'Current' section: www.rawm.net). Research (including desk-based analysis of published work, regional consultation event, telephone and e-consultation) sought to review work undertaken to date on developing infrastructure investment plans (IIPs) by the nine

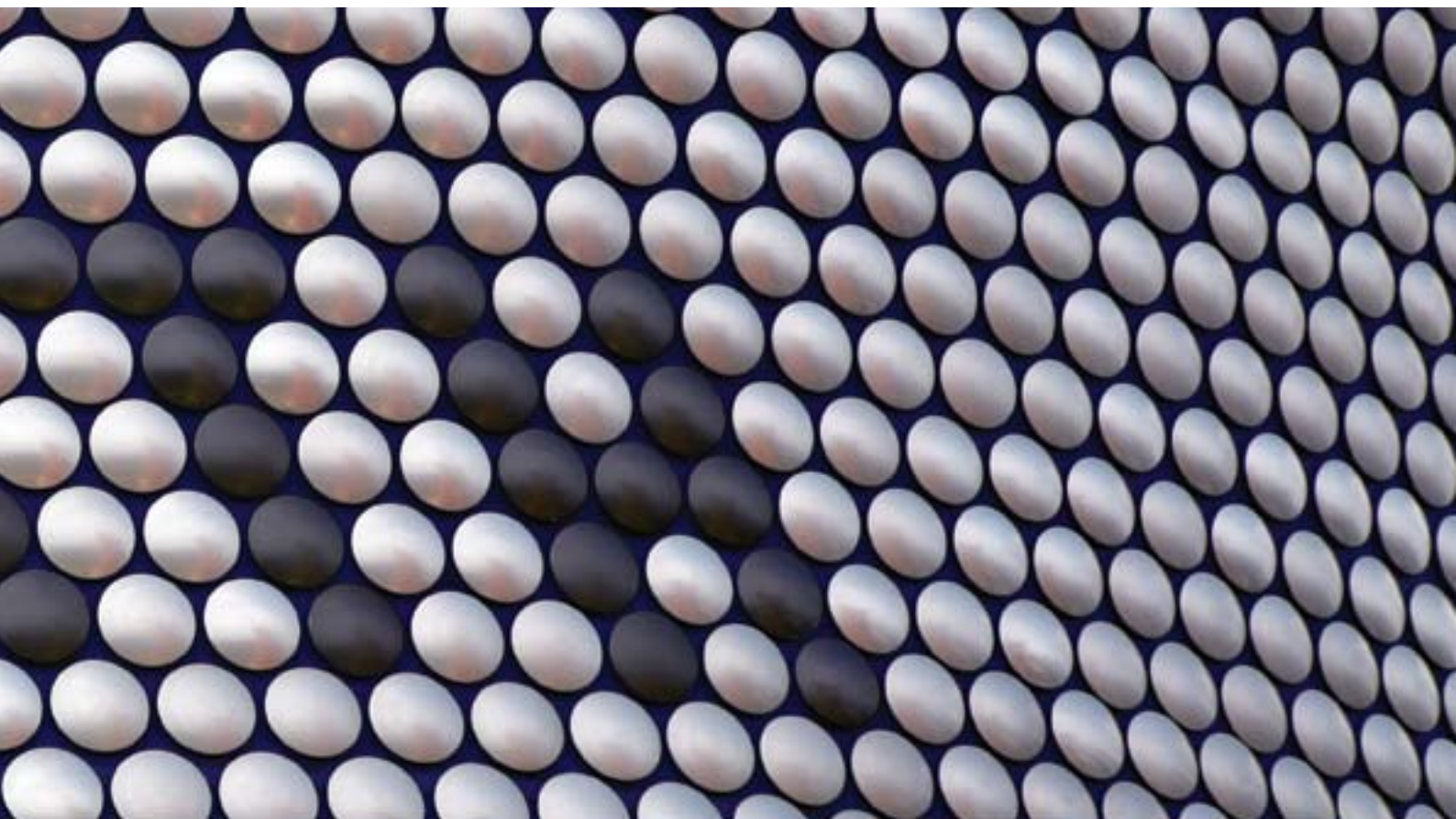
geographically-based ChangeUp Consortia. This review highlighted a relatively low level of engagement with faith-based organisations and communities.

West Midlands Infrastructure Investment Plans

- Of nine different IIPs reviewed, (or, if unpublished, work made available as drafts), there was little faith-based social action and voluntary activity reflected to any great extent, excepting Coventry and Warwickshire.
- A specific perspective on the issues faced by faith-based organisations is generally lacking in virtually all IIPs. This was unlike a specific BME dimension (very common) or a social enterprise dimension (less common but frequent).
- This does not necessarily mean that faith-based organisations have been ignored; ChangeUp Consortia may have overlooked disaggregating the faith sector.

Consortia membership

- Coventry and Warwickshire is one sub-region to have a faith body member on its consortium due in part to the influence exercised by the Coventry Diocese in its IIP.



- Coventry Diocese is one of the more significant support providers in the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region, delivering support and funding to faith-based groups. It is also recognised nationally and has assisted in generating over £3m of funding over the last two years to support community buildings and activities.
- Faith-specific support providers are members of two further Consortia (Staffordshire and Stoke-on Trent, and Birmingham). No other consortium has faith-based membership, although there is some interaction with faith-based organisations via community and voluntary networks.
- By and large ChangeUp consortia (and by inference the majority of 'second tier' support organisations) do not see – or have not had communicated to them – any defining characteristics that can be said to fuel distinctly different developmental needs amongst faith-based organisations.
- There appears to be little understanding – and no evidence – of the scale or nature of the contribution made by faith-based organisations.

In summary, with the exception of some sub-regions and regional bodies, faith-based VCOs are not engaging in a sustained way with funding

bodies and with ChangeUp consortia and other mainstream support providers. Religious minority VCOs and 'belief' VCOs (such as humanist groups) also face significant barriers to engagement.

A photograph showing a close-up of a glass door or window. The word "FAITH" is visible through the glass, appearing as a large, bold, sans-serif font. The background behind the glass is blurred, suggesting an interior space. The lighting is warm, and the overall tone is soft and focused on the text.

Engaging with faith-based organisations

In the previous section, we established that there can be benefits to engaging with faith-based VCOs and that these VCOs are not engaging in a sustained way with funding bodies, policy makers and support providers. This section outlines some specific challenges involved in engaging with faith-based organisations and some practical tips and information for improving engagement.

Before we do that, we outline some useful definitions to consider. There is often confusion amongst organisations providing support for faith-based organisations about the difference between 'faith communities', 'faith-based VCOs' and so on. This short list of definitions seeks to address that:

Some useful definitions

Faith

The term 'faith' is sometimes used as a synonym for religion, but tends to place a greater emphasis on the individual and their relationship with religious and spiritual belief systems. Whilst religion usually requires faith to be rooted in a belief in spiritual or supernatural forces which transcend everyday reality, it can also refer to ritualised practices or the use of a particular set of traditions. At an individual level, faith may reflect a personal choice and commitment, but can also be embedded in history, culture and society.

Faith communities

Shared beliefs, values and practices bind people together, giving them a sense of common identity and belonging – both key features of all communities and not exclusive to faith communities. Beyond religious beliefs and values, people of the same faith tend to share common references and experiences, including scriptures, teachings, ceremonies and rituals. Identification with a faith community may reflect a deep personal conviction or one could simply be born into one. The term 'faith communities' is being increasingly used by policy-makers and Government although, as with any marker of identity, it can homogenise and overlook the diversity that exists within those same communities.

Faith-based organisations

Previously, the term that might have been most commonly used may have been 'religious organisations'. However, there is a rationale in offering some differentiation in that 'faith-based organisations' could more specifically refer to organisations that are shaped or inspired by faith, but do not necessarily involve any activities that are explicitly religious. 'Faith-based organisations' would therefore exclude religious congregations and those involved in proselytism for example.

Faith Organisations

Communities and Local Government (CLG) define faith organisation as those "where the majority of its members



adhere to the same faith. Its members share a world view or life stance that involves a set of moral and spiritual values and beliefs about the nature of life and the world. They will usually, but not always, believe in a god or gods”.

Faith-based voluntary sector

In reality, there is no single faith-based voluntary sector, just as there is no single black and minority ethnic (BME) voluntary sector. These terms are a convenience, but have widespread currency and are widely used. This is not a debate we need dwell on here. Suffice to say that while it may be convenient to regard the sector (and society) as comprising distinct ‘faith communities’, the reality is much more complex and diverse and so simple assumptions that the ‘faith-based voluntary sector’ has any special or particularities that cannot be found elsewhere in the third sector cannot be made.

Challenges of engaging with faith-based VCOs

There are a number of assumptions made about faith-based VCOs that can limit engagement by organisations that could potentially offer support. On page 11, we outline some challenges we identified in conversations with ChangeUp consortia, along with potential ways of addressing those challenges.

Good practice

As part of this project, we identified a number of examples of engagement that were already happening between faith-based organisations and ChangeUp Consortia in the West Midlands:

- Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent consortia have included a commitment to incorporate the identified needs and priorities of faith-based networks and infrastructure bodies into future infrastructure delivery mechanisms and plans.
- In the Coventry and Warwickshire consortium’s IIP they note: “Additional work to map faith groups would be desirable because although the Church of England is comparatively well understood and resourced, there is a wide diversity of other Christian denominations and other faith groups that are missing from statutory agencies’ knowledge”.
- In Shropshire, ChangeUp consortium networks with Churches Together in Shropshire.
- The Black Country consortium currently engages with a range of infrastructure networks and umbrella organisations including the BME forum.



Challenges of engaging with faith-based VCOs

Challenge	Response
<p>Proselytisation and evangelisation</p> <p>The taking over of projects and activities for the benefit of the faith or faith-community in question rather than the wider community</p> <p>Deeply entrenched stereotypes about faith and faith communities</p> <p>Negative experiences of organised religion in the past</p>	<p>When deciding whether to fund, support or engage with faith-based VCOs, they should be judged in the same way as other VCOs are increasingly being judged (i.e. the impact that they make on the people they provide services for).</p> <p>The same types of evidence should be used to reach those decisions (looking at for example, the reach and inclusivity of services, the social, economic and community impact of services as well as the 'added value' organisations offer).</p> <p>This should encourage support providers and funding bodies to see faith-based organisations as part of the wider sector. In this instance, faith is seen as secondary to the kind of contribution organisations are making to improve the lives of local people.</p>
<p>Not knowing who to engage with to get a faith sector perspective</p> <p>Getting faith-based organisations to 'want' to be engaged with support providers?</p>	<p>Not all faith-based organisations want to engage with organisations that could potentially provide support for them. Some organisations may want to continue doing exactly what they have been doing for many years: serving the interests of their constituency without necessarily looking to go beyond that, or securing additional support.</p> <p>There are a number of key bodies, partnerships that could be used to advocate on behalf of faith-based organisations. However, it is important to recognise that umbrella organisations of this type do not always represent the diversity of the religion and belief sector, so additional steps will need to be taken to engage those groups that might be excluded (such as minority religious and belief groups).</p>
<p>A lack of clarity about the added value – the unique selling point – that faith-based organisations offer over and above the third sector per se and how this might be evidentially demonstrated</p> <p>The ability of faith-based organisations to be inclusive and address the needs of a diverse range of beneficiaries</p> <p>The ability of faith-based organisations to be able to evaluate and assess their impact</p>	<p>Each of these challenges are the same as those encountered by numerous other specialist third sector organisations quite irrespective of whether they are faith-based or not. As with all other organisations, providing infrastructure and capacity building support could be an initial point of engagement. In doing so, frontline organisations would be in a better position to monitor and evaluate the services that they offer, understand and publicise the impact their work is making.</p>

Towards an inclusive engagement strategy: Recommended actions

The recommendations below are aimed primarily at support providers and ChangeUp Consortia in particular. We also include, where relevant, recommendations for actions that faith-based organisations should be taking.

1. Identify the kinds of skills/experience needed when looking for a faith sector perspective on infrastructure support

At present when engagement is happening, it is overwhelmingly concerned with representation. Approaches to engagement do not seek to assemble specific skills, aptitudes or expertise: rather, they seek merely to address an assumed 'demographic deficit' by ensuring that 'representatives' from particular religious groups are present.

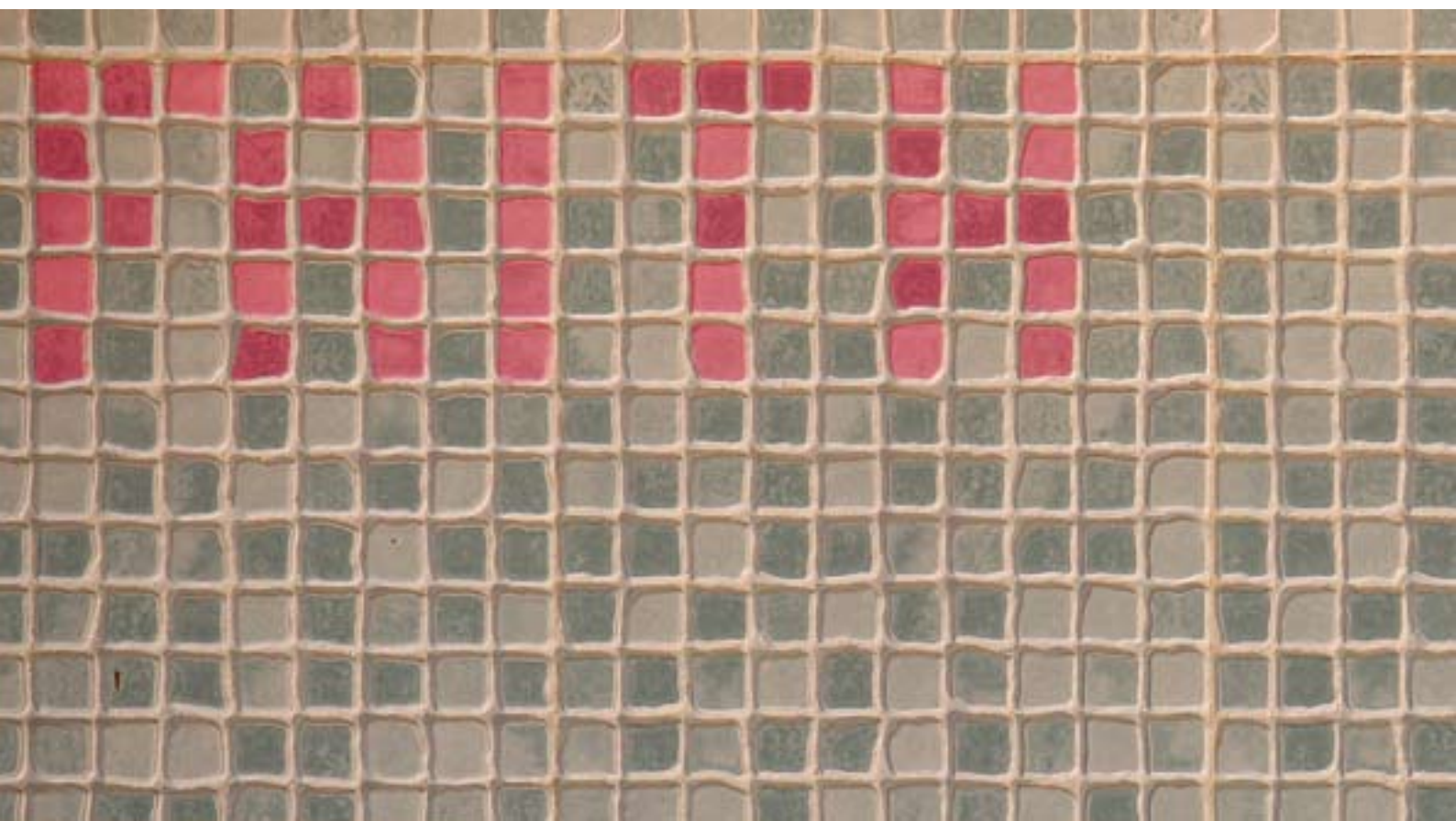
While group representation models can play an important role, their weaknesses are increasingly being recognised: they assume a homogeneity on the part of the group being represented that rarely, if ever, exists; they tend to assume that a single individual voice speaking from their own experience represents the views of a wider community; and they tend to emphasise identity over expertise. Instead of representation we

are proposing that faith-based organisations are invited to contribute regional or local intelligence, views and advice derived from their expertise and knowledge.

Of course, moving away from such models of representation will inevitably provide faith-based groups - especially those that are frequently called upon to 'represent' their communities - with significant challenges. If other types of third sector organisations continue to influence the development of infrastructure support on the basis of particular identities (such as BME organisations), then this will make it a lot harder for faith-based organisations to move away from engagement of this type.

2. Build equality expertise and identify religious discrimination

While many believe that being able to identify progressive equality practice is essentially attitudinal - something that derives from the experience of being from a minority group and is therefore inextricably intertwined with personal identity - competence in equalities should be seen as a learned skill. Thus, support providers and ChangeUp consortia members that are seeking to engage with faith-based organisations should seek



to develop those skills and should be in a position to identify religion or belief discrimination if it is happening. Similarly, those faith-based organisations that engage with support providers should be supported to develop the skills needed to engage in a similarly constructive way. These skills might include:

- A strong commitment to equality and human rights;
- The ability to engage and work constructively with religious, interfaith and non-religious groups on equality and human rights issues;
- A commitment to sharing expertise and good practice with others;
- An ability to identify and analyse evidence of religion or belief discrimination.

3. Improve access to information/ engagement opportunities

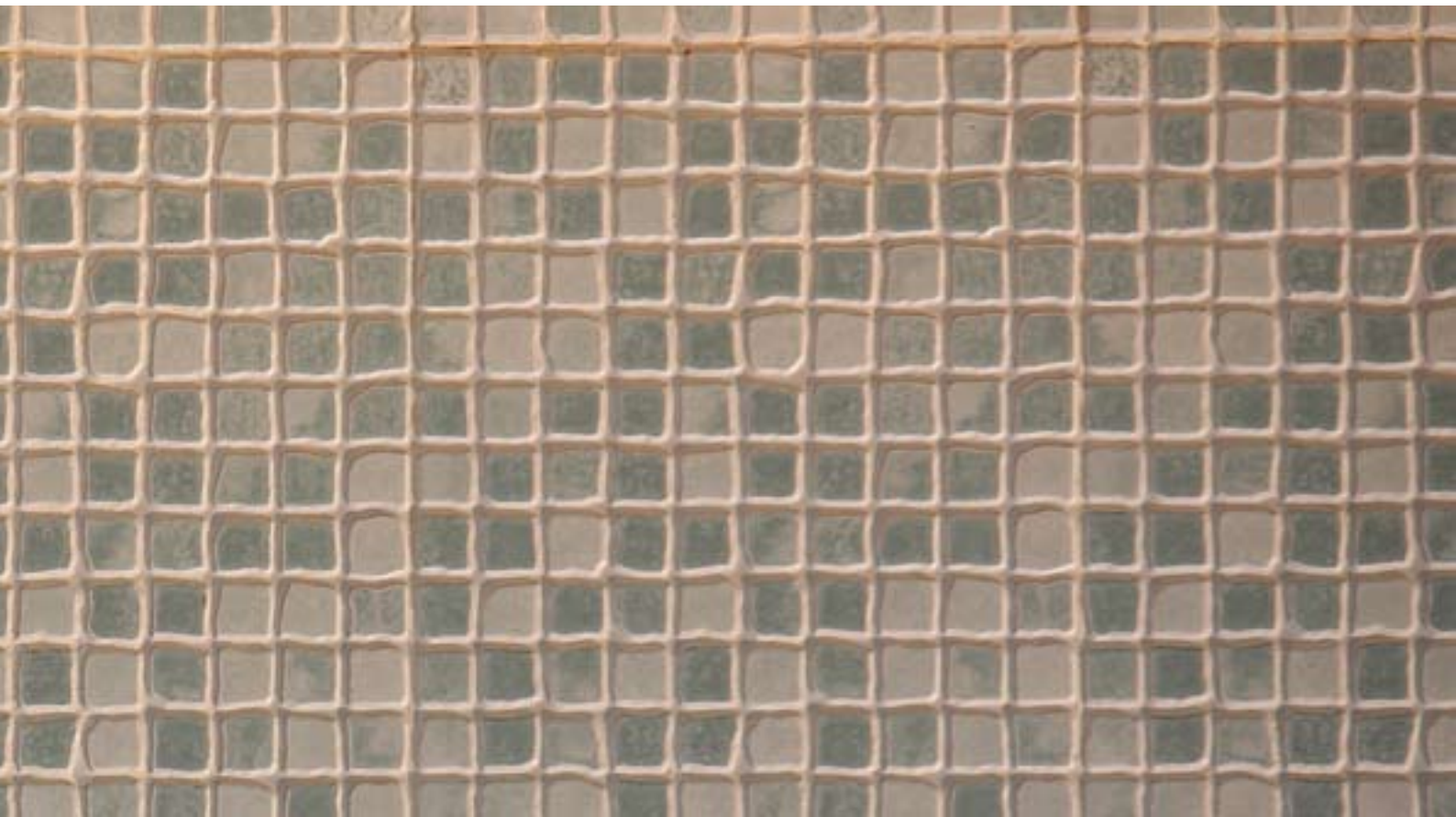
Many faith-based VCOs that we spoke to as part of this project were not aware of what ChangeUp consortia are or indeed the opportunities that they had to influence and shape support services in their area. In order for support providers to develop more

contextualised services and respond to the real life needs of specialist frontline organisations (including faith-based organisations), there needs to be a generally much clearer offer from support providers. This would include clear guidance about how frontline organisations can engage with them to inform them of their support needs.

4. Increase confidence in ChangeUp Consortia/support providers

Consortia should make concerted efforts to 'market' their services to relevant stakeholders in the faith sector to expand the constituency for engagement and encourage wider buy-in across all sectors. While many faith-based organisations have no knowledge of ChangeUp and thus no opinion on its impact, those organisations that have encountered ChangeUp were not sure about what the initiative would be able to achieve. There is potential here for ChangeUp to develop a more robust marketing strategy that communicates updates on commissioned projects, including details on how groups can get involved.

The basis for engagement should be clearly defined so that there is a sound understanding



of what is required by all parties and should go beyond merely ticking the box.

5. Create spaces for frontline organisations to think about and define their support needs

Develop alternative spaces and/or forums where stakeholders from both faith and non-faith perspectives can come together to discuss infrastructure support needs. Many of the infrastructure support needs of faith-based organisations are similar to those of other frontline organisations. Yet, frontline organisations do not often have opportunities to explore this synergy. Discussions of this type will help faith-based VCOs to develop more robust arguments for when tailor-made approaches are appropriate and should be made available.

Faith-based VCOs and other frontline organisations should also be supported to make a 'case' for improved infrastructure support. If frontline organisations are able to demonstrate the impact that they are making on the lives of local communities, then are likely to be in a better position to lobby for increased infrastructure support. Indeed frontline organisations will need to acknowledge that they will be increasingly judged on the basis of the impact that they make. Creating an argument for increased support in this way is likely to be more successful than relying

solely on the basis of ethnic or religious identity of organisations to attract increased support.

To do this however, frontline organisations will need support in understanding the wider context of the third sector, including the government's desire to re-position the voluntary and community sector in relation to the public sector. This may involve supporting faith-based organisations to develop performance improvement processes, in particular monitoring and evaluation processes. This will help frontline organisations to build more of an evidence-base about the kind of impact they have had, which is likely to be a pre-requisite to accessing public funds and infrastructure support in the near future.



New support initiatives

There are two new support initiatives which faith-based VCOs in the West Midlands can use, the WMFF 'FaithReach' pilot project and the national network provided by FaithAction. Details are provided below.

WEST MIDLANDS FAITHS FORUM 'FAITHREACH' PILOT PROJECT

ChangeUp



FUNDED



The FaithReach Pilot Project, funded through the CapacityBuilders Improving Reach Programme, will assist faith-based organisations to identify and access capacity building resources (including help with accessing funding, enhancing governance and workforce development).

A sign-posting and gateway advice service has been launched June 2007 that includes enhanced information, web links and downloads available through the WMFF website.

To register and take advantage of this pilot service complete a registration form online at www.wmfaithsforum.org.uk or contact Angelina Jetson: angelina.jetson@wmfaiths.org.uk



FAITHACTION

A NEW NATIONAL NETWORK REPRESENTING FAITH AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS DELIVERING PUBLIC SERVICES

FaithAction is a new national network that has received government funding to be the voice of faith and community organisations delivering public services.

Through a national staff team and nine regional offices, **FaithAction** is bringing together grassroots organisations that are delivering or seeking to deliver public services and helping them access funds, deliver contracts and create more effective partnerships with government at every level.

FaithAction has two aims:

- To represent faith-based and community organisations that are engaged or seeking to become engaged in the delivery of public services;
- To support the increase of public service delivery by faith based and community organisations.

To join the FaithAction Network, complete the form online at www.faithaction.net



brap

brap is a strategic equalities-based advisory organisation with an established local, regional and national remit. It was formulated nine years ago to provide a progressive and evidence-based approach to mitigating widespread inequality and discrimination. Initially, as Birmingham Race Action Partnership, the organisation developed a reputation for offering an evidence-based and de-ethnicised approach to addressing issues of 'race' equality. **brap**, since its inception, has drawn upon the philosophy and principles underpinning human rights, recognising the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional, 'silo' approach to equalities that only 'allows' people to have one relevant identity at a time.

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