

Evaluation of Oldham Interfaith Forum Project for Building Good Community Relations

1. Statistical indicators of the impact of Community Cohesion work across Oldham.
 - a. You and your community survey.

One of the statistical surveys that used to be carried out every two or three years from 2006 to 2013 was the “You and your Community” survey. This suggested that there had been an increase in the number of Oldham residents, who said that people from different ethnic backgrounds get on well together. The not insignificant increase had been from a low base of 27% in 2006 to 32% in 2010. Whereas there has been a slight decrease in that percentage in 2013 (back to 30%), the percentage of people seeing race relations as a problem in Oldham has dropped from 17% in 2008 and 2010 to 15% in 2013.

- b. Those who vote in General elections or By-elections for the BNP.

The BNP burst onto the political scene in Oldham at the General election in 2001. Then 16.4% of voters in Oldham West and 11.3% of voters in Oldham East and Saddleworth voted BNP. This vote was considerably eroded over the next few years with 7.1% of voters in Oldham West and only 5.72% of voters in Oldham East and Saddleworth voting BNP in 2010. In the 2011 by-election, the BNP vote was reduced even further to 4.5%, and, in the latest elections the BNP have not even fielded a candidate.

2. Can the Oldham Interfaith Forum claim to have significantly impacted on these indicators?

There has been a strategic “partnership” response to the problems of a segregated Oldham and it would be wrong for any one of the groups involved to claim sole responsibility for the improvement in cohesion. There can be no doubt, however, that while there are different divides affecting the overall picture of cohesion, the faith divide is particularly significant. Perhaps it follows, then, that work which attempts to build relations across that divide has a greater importance. But the particular value of the voluntary, community and faith sector in this area of work is recognised because of its ability to reach the parts that the statutory and private sectors find it difficult to reach.

The public sector has the power to exert its leverage on cohesion issues through policy-making and service delivery, especially on sensitive issues such as housing and policing. On the other hand the role of the third sector in relation to cohesion agendas has come to be seen more in terms of engaging directly with

communities and especially those defined as hard-to reach communities and communities of interest” (Evaluating the impact of voluntary and community sector organisations on community cohesion, J.C. Cock, Goldsmiths University, 2009).

a. Importance of “faith” in building cohesion in Oldham.

What has been seen, on a local level in Oldham, is the playing out of tensions that have been developing elsewhere at the same time, but on a global scale. The tensions are fed by the perception of a necessary clash of civilizations between what has been called “the world of Islam” and “the secular liberal west”. This simplistic bi-polar world-view has surely affected Oldham’s experience of segregation. Yes, there are problems of divides between rural and urban parts of the Borough, between rich and poor and between young people and old. But they have not been the main source of division. The BNP has tried to portray itself at times as a defender of the Christian faith on something akin to a 21st Century crusade, with the flag of St George as its emblem. There was little doubt too of the target of EDL criticism; their claim was to challenge Muslim extremism but their practice was to attack mainstream Islam.

b. OIF clearly identified as a threat by BNP

One of the ways that we can perhaps demonstrate the impact of the Interfaith Forum in improving cohesion is to recognise how the BNP identified it as a target for criticism. In a letter to the Oldham Chronicle on April 14th 2004, one BNP spokesman identified three individuals and one organisation for such criticism. Phil Sumner, as one of the spokespeople for the Interfaith Forum, was the first to be mentioned. One might well conclude that the message of the Interfaith Forum was indeed hurting the BNP.

c. Appearance of OIF in the Press and Media generally

A deliberate strategy of the Interfaith Forum has been to use the Media, in all its forms, to preach a message of cohesion and to challenge the myth of a necessary “clash of civilizations”. When the images of the disturbances in Oldham’s streets were published and broadcast in 2001, the perception of many was that these disturbances were happening all over Oldham. The strategy of the Interfaith Forum has been to use the Media to publish or broadcast examples of people from across the religious divides interacting and enjoying each other’s company. Our claim is that people then perceive interaction of this sort to be taking place everywhere. Once a particular type of behaviour is seen to be “normal”, more people begin to adopt it.

The Forum has been particularly successful in this regard with hundreds of favourable reports, letters or articles published in the Oldham papers. But it has also successfully used the different community radio stations to broadcast discussions about the importance of cohesion. Its spokespeople have been interviewed about the work of the Forum many times on local, regional and national radio stations and several times on regional television. In 2001, people in one local Christian community were often suggesting that they did not speak or mix with people from the Muslim communities. Now, the usually declared perception is that they are mixing much more these days. While there is still a long way to go, this perception will enable even greater interaction.

Indeed, the Forum has impressed so many with its theory and its effectiveness that its spokespeople have been asked to speak at several international conferences and at one world conference on the development of cities. This was held in Brazil in February 2008. One of its members was, in 2011, a witness for “Multiculturalism” on BBC Radio 4’s “The Moral Maze”. In November 2017, two of its members were invited by the MP for Oldham West to address the British and American Project (BAP) when the latter visited Oldham. One of the Forum’s members has also attended meetings with David Cameron when he was Prime Minister and, subsequently, with Theresa May and the Communities Secretary. It has been asked to give evidence to a parliamentary select Committee and, recently, to be involved with the Home Office and the Department for Housing and Communities in their development of a new Integration policy.

The Interfaith Forum has worked with the leadership of the different faith communities to promote a vision of cohesion. The former editor of the Oldham Chronicle (this paper has since gone into liquidation) clearly recognised the importance of the part played by the Forum in this regard. In one “Chronicle Comment” on 3rd June, 2009, we read:

Father Phil Sumner, Roman Catholic priest and spokesman for the Interfaith Forum, sums it up for Oldham when he says: “Oldham is a diverse community and we are proud of all our citizens. The BNP is campaigning to dismantle, disrupt and fragment our society. Their message is a travesty of the Christian faith, an insult to other faiths and a danger to the harmony of our borough.”

Fr. Sumner’s view is supported by the Anglican Bishop of Manchester and the overwhelming majority of people in the Borough of Oldham.

A second “Chronicle Comment”, in the following month commended a campaign spearheaded by the Oldham Mosques’ Council with the support of the Interfaith Forum. This campaign made it completely clear that the Muslim communities of Oldham were united in their desire to combat violent extremism and to condemn terrorist attacks. The “Chronicle comment” claimed:

It is an outspoken and robust attack that clearly pinpoints terrorists and men of violence as the common enemy of people of all faiths and cultures. It could not have been more clearly put and the Mosques' Council is to be commended for the initiative.

On 16th December, 2015, a further “Chronicle comment” stated:

Oldham's Interfaith Forum has been hosting the Festival of Light in the borough for many years. But, given the tensions around the world as we deal with the real threat of terrorism strikes, its message has never been more topical...The uplifting nature of the Festival of Light...is always a time for reflection.

In December 2016, part of the Festival of Light was shown on the Sunday Politics Show on BBC 1. Oldham had been referred to, in the Louise Casey Report, for its problematic segregation, and the Festival of Light was shown as an example of Work with adult population / Breadth of that work and evaluation of impact by service users from Oldham happily interacting across cultural divides.

d. Work with adult population / Breadth of that work and evaluation of impact by service users

An independent evaluation of the Interfaith Forum carried out by ERS Research and Consultancy (of Carlisle, Bristol, Leicester and Newcastle) in 2009 stated: “The OIF has established excellent cross community links and a wide network of partners and volunteers.” “The OIF has well developed networks and partnership working is seen as key to achieving impacts and reaching out to a range of communities. As an essential operational requirement, this is embedded in working practices.”

Over two thousand people, from across the Borough of Oldham, will have attended one or other of the events put on by the Interfaith Forum in the three years of funding (from 2015-2018). The major event of the year is the Festival of Light. According to those who filled in our evaluation sheets after the Festival of Light in December 2017, 78% of those attending were doing so for the first time. 86% of those attending claimed that the event had improved their understanding of a faith. This suggests that the Forum is reaching different people all the time and that what it does is helping to develop respect between communities of faith.

The Forum also worked with the Oldham Mosques' Council to put on an event in 2015 called “Saving a generation” which was attended by about 300 people. This event enabled people to learn about the Prevent agenda but also to develop ways that people locally could prevent radicalisation together. In December, 2017 the Forum provided 2 speakers (one a Christian priest, the other a Hindu) for an event in a Muslim Centre

(The European Islamic Centre) exploring ways to improve community cohesion. The event was attended by over 300 people and was featured on a Muslim-interest television programme.

The work of the Forum is coordinated by two full time staff but they engage many more people, who give of their time and expertise on a purely voluntary basis. It's this ability to encourage and co-ordinate interfaith volunteers that adds considerably to the impact and effectiveness of the project across the Borough.

At the end of 2009, an independent evaluation of the work of the Forum was carried out by ERS Research and Consultancy. There, the suggestion was made: "The key area for improvement is in capturing and demonstrating the real impact, influence and value of the project (including the amount of volunteer time invested) in an appropriate and systematic way without impacting significantly on its capacity to deliver." As a result, the Forum identified that 94 different people, together, contributed 2,741 hours of voluntary interfaith work in the years 2009 and 2010. The Forum's strategy is also to develop champions for Community Cohesion so as to employ John Paul Lederach's (cf. *The Moral Imagination*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005 pp. 75-86) spider's web approach to building peace. This takes particular anchor points (potential leading voices within their own communities or age groups) from across the demographic of the Borough and works with them to create champions who share a vision for cohesion. One of these champions wrote:

"I have taken part in training events delivered by the Oldham Interfaith Forum. The forum enabled me to network with other organisations in different parts of the borough. I feel that the manner in which I communicate with members of Oldham's mix of cultures has dramatically improved. The OIFF has given the borough's smaller community groups, a voice that is now heard" (Mowlana Kamal Uddin Khan, Principal of Alleef Academy).

Because many members of the Muslim communities do attend events at their Mosques/ Masjids or Madrasas, this provided a useful means through which to spread a vision of cohesion. In former years, the Forum put on "Road shows" in different Muslim communities with, altogether, over two thousand people attending and a similar number of people hearing a broadcast of the speeches on community radio.

Besides actually bringing different faith communities together, the Forum has become a valued partner for the statutory sector in delivering the Community Cohesion aspects of that sector's work. Different faith communities, in recent years, have been responding to the need to develop much better procedures with regard to safeguarding children. Oldham Social Services has found the Interfaith Forum a most valuable partner in this regard, especially in encouraging Madrasa teachers to attend training in child behaviour management. Over 200 teachers have already received this training.

The Forum has also worked with the police and the Probation service to help them to understand the particular needs of different communities and so to serve them better. At least three times in recent years, including once on 6th December 2017, the Common Purpose Training Programme, for people involved in leadership, have used the Forum as one of the organisations that it exposes its trainees to because of what Common Purpose sees as the organisation's ability to identify and address challenges and to achieve. In 2015 the Forum also developed a strong relationship with Dr. Kershaw's Hospice. They have put on two joint interfaith events since to help the Hospice express its desire to serve the whole community.

Over the years, the Forum has had difficulty in enabling women's representation on panels for "Any Questions" events or ensuring that women are properly represented in the organisation's decision-making. This is partly because leadership in many churches, mosques and temples is exercised only by men! However, to redress the balance, the Forum supports and facilitates a Women's Interfaith network. Members of this group have the right of representation on the Forum itself and on the Forum's Steering group. The Forum tries to ensure that the MC's at major events are equally balanced between male and female and between the different faiths. While the women's group is numerically small, it is active and has organised two of the Forum's discussion groups in the last twelve months which attracted women who had not previously used the Forum's services.

The independent evaluation carried out by ERS Research and Consultancy in 2009 reported: "OIF are now targeting the engagement of Asian women. This is seen as having a particularly strong potential contribution to the equalities agenda, with well documented difficulties experienced by local authorities in engaging with this group due to cultural issues."

e. Work with schools and young people.

There have been many other examples of the Forum being a valued partner to the Statutory Sector. In 2009 the independent evaluation carried out by ERS Research and Consultancy stated; "A continued focus on young people is thought to be the most effective means of shaping positive interfaith relationships in Oldham." Since June, 2010, the Forum has delivered more than ten "Any questions on Faith" events for the Oldham Sixth Form College with over one hundred students attending each event. For these events, the Forum has provided the panels of experts. A representative of the College wrote:

Oldham Interfaith Forum kindly gathered together a panel of faith leaders so that the students could ask any question on faith. The students were a little slow to start but with the help of the AS Religious Studies students they really did ask ANYTHING! Over the day approximately 300 students took part and really

enjoyed and benefited from the interactive nature of the sessions. The tutors also commented on how informative and enjoyable they found the sessions.

From 2015 these “Any Questions events have formed the basis of a Young People’s Interfaith Forum with the development also of an Interfaith Discussion group in the College. This group has only met a couple of times since because of the demands of the student timetable. When they have taken place it has been during the students’ lunch hour.

In the last year, the Forum has also carried out 43 interfaith awareness raising workshops in about 30 different schools across the Borough. This has involved speaking to over 3,000 pupils. But over the course of our project we have delivered many more workshops and to great effect. The Deputy Head of Horton Mill Primary School commented on our session with his school:

“My colleagues found the sessions entertaining, useful, age-appropriate and challenging. All commented on the fact that children were enthralled by the content, enthused by the presentation and felt that it is this kind of workshop that is so powerful in challenging children’s perceptions.”

One of these workshops, a few years ago, was also OFSTED inspected. The Inspector commented in his report:

“During the inspection, an outstanding example was observed when a Muslim imam and a Catholic priest from the local community came together to talk about their respective faiths with the Year 6 pupils. The occasion was handled with great good humour and insight, modelling community cohesion for the pupils” (Alan Brine, HMI for OFSTED).

In the last year the Forum has also facilitated 9 visits to places of worship. These visits have involved different schools from the Borough. Over 400 children have made at least one visit. A few years ago, after one such visit, the Head teacher of the Shropshire School commented:

All the staff agreed that there was lots of "awe and wonder" on show in both visits. All in all it is the best trip we have done in terms of learning by both children and adults and enjoyment. Ofsted were in last week and they were truly impressed with the work we have done on community cohesion and especially our trip to Oldham. (John Eglin, head teacher from Morda Primary school in Shropshire).

A local teacher also commented about the visit made by her school:

"We are now of the opinion that these visits and interactions with other religious leaders are crucial for the future integration of our community" (Jennifer Hetherington Religious Education Coordinator St Mary's Primary School High Crompton Shaw).

In 2015 the Mahdlo Youth Centre was experiencing serious intercultural tension between some of its members. The youth leaders approached the Forum for help in addressing that tension and gaining distance from it. The Forum put together a programme which lasted over several months and concluded with a residential weekend away for those who had been at loggerheads with each other. The youth leaders were very grateful for the help that was given by the Forum and have invited them to speak to their youth several times since then.

In June 2007, the Interfaith Forum worked with a culturally diverse group of 18 young people from the Borough. These were between the ages of 18 and 25. After six preparatory sessions to explore the dynamics of segregation and conflict, and the benefits of diversity, the group travelled to Srebrenica and Auschwitz to see the impact of extremism. The concept for the programme was based again on John Paul Lederach's spider's web approach to building peace. Since their return members of the group have delivered moving presentations about their visit to about 1000 people and been interviewed on local radio. But they have also developed strategies in their own areas of work to show that community cohesion is now a priority for them. An example of this can be seen through five members of the group who were some of the main drivers in the development of the Oldham Muslim Centre. One of the declared five main priorities for that Centre is "to provide a social space to allow people from different backgrounds, cultures and faiths to come together and work for the common good." There have been several activities in the Centre to demonstrate that this priority is being put into effect. Also, in 2009, two years after the Leading to Respect Programme, Oldham Muslim Centre was adjudged to be the best Mosque in Oldham for engaging with the wider community (Oldham Mosques' Council Awards 2009).

"The LTR ... had a huge impact on my professional and personal life; it helped me to understand different communities and cultures...Some of my peers and I, after the trip, went on to play an instrumental role in helping to set up the £2.2m Oldham Muslim Centre. This centre has now won numerous awards for its work in the community" (Ruhel Khan, Service user).

f. Website for the Forum

The independent evaluation carried out by ERS Research and Consultancy in 2009 reported: "The next steps for the Forum also include the completion of the official website, which has been identified as a gap." In the last few years the Forum has

established and maintained an informative, attractive and up-to-date website. We employ a sub-contractor to assist in this process and to take the photographs at, or the footage of, events. For some time, the Forum tried to develop this website “in-house” but, after a while, it was necessary to accept that we needed to buy in outside support. Since then, the website has become much more professional and exciting. In the last twelve months, the website has been accessed more than 35 thousand times by people and about the same by “bots”. In the same period, five thousand four hundred people have followed the Newsfeed. This overall usage of the site is showing a fivefold increase on the previous year.

g. Participation in Civic society.

The Forum’s members have sat on or continue to sit on several decision-making or advisory bodies in the Borough. These have included or include the Executive and Steering Group of Oldham’s Partnership, the Building Schools for the Future Project Board, the Voluntary Community and Faith Sector Partnership, the Strong Communities Strategy Group, the Community Safety and Cohesion Partnership Board, the Resilience to Community Tension Group, the Community Cohesion Strategic Group of the BSF Programme, The Oldham Story Project Steering Group, Oldham Race Equality Partnership, Oldham’s SACRE (The Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education), Oldham’s Local Children Safeguarding Board and Oldham’s Adult Safeguarding Board. and the Independent Remuneration Panel for the Local Authority etc..

h. Resilience to threats and conflict.

The final area under which the Forum would evaluate its own impact would be in terms of how it plays its part to establish a real resilience locally to threats to community cohesion. The Local Authority recognises the importance of the regular reports that the Forum makes to the Borough-wide Community tension monitoring process.

The Interfaith Forum has been a key partner in helping to manage threats to good community relations. They help in communicating with communities at times when tensions are raised – feeding in information about community concerns and passing back out key messages from the Partnership... The Forum has also played a leadership role when communities are under stress, with key figures from different faiths standing together and delivering shared messages (Bruce Penhale, Head of Community Cohesion Support, Oldham Council).

When there have been increases in the tension, the Forum has been a highly valued partner to get important messages out to particular faith communities. On one notable

occasion when the EDL were protesting in Manchester, the Forum worked closely with Oldham Race Equality Partnership to establish a local community command centre. This involved staffing the centre so as to monitor the progress of the protest and check for any conflict areas as the protest dispersed. Taxi ranks, takeaways and pub-watch members were invited to phone in with any information of conflict. The staff monitored “Twitter” and made regular phone calls to members in the actual protest. They had the telephone contact for the police command centre and would immediately inform the police of any concerns.

But, even before the protest the Forum worked with a group of young Muslims who were influential in their own communities to dissuade others from attending the protest or from being drawn into any conflict. They also put on diversionary positive activity for young people at the time of the protest.

When tensions arose locally as a result of the blockade of Gaza early in 2009, the Forum was one of the main partners who organised a peaceful demonstration in Oldham. The demonstration successfully released many of the tensions. These had been caused by the perceived injustices and the perceived insufficient reaction of other countries throughout the world. It was important for the Borough that people had the opportunity to express their anger in a peaceful way. This would avoid the potential for actual unrest in the Borough that might give oxygen to extremists on different sides. 1625 people attended this demonstration and everything went off peacefully.

More recently, after the bomb in the Manchester Evening News Arena, the Forum helped to support people affected, either because of loss of life or because of subsequent (and, arguably, consequent) Islamophobic attacks. Its staff supported the families of two of the victims of the bomb attack and the members of two Mosques which were attacked.

When youths were behaving in a dangerous and antisocial way around a local Metrolink station, the Local Authority contacted the Forum for its assistance, working, in partnership with a local youth leader, to address the situation.

i. Comment of the Senior Officer for Communities from Oldham Council.

“Oldham as a Borough continues to change with many of its neighbourhoods becoming more ethnically, culturally and socially diverse. To increase the understanding of the role that faith plays in all those that live and work in Oldham, the Council commissions Oldham Interfaith Forum to contribute to building good relations, with a particular focus on improving understanding between people from different faith backgrounds; assisting in managing community tensions and preventing conflict; providing a mechanism for the Council to work constructively with faith leaders through the Inter-Faith Forum and Oldham Mosques Council; supporting the Council engaging with faith

communities and in ensuring that Council services are sensitive to the needs of those communities and supporting dialogue within and between faith communities about issues of concern.

The Oldham Interfaith Forum is a valued and respected partner that the Council works with to understand the challenges that the Borough faces on a daily basis. The forum continues to showcase the work of faith organisations and celebrate success. It has far reaching work that ranges from delivering faith based assemblies and engagement with young people to challenging viewpoints and enabling dialogue which promotes understanding between people of different faiths or no faith. The forum also supports the local authority with regards to the implementation of the Prevent Duty and work to challenge extremist ideologies.”

j. Area for possible development

In spite of all the successes of this project, there are areas for improvement or development. One possible such area would be to increase the number of agents for building good relationships across the different communities of faith. Currently, so much of the success of the project depends on a relatively small group of people, representative of the different faith communities. The project would become more efficient and more sustainable if the work of building good relationships was spread across the different communities associated with churches, mosques or temples. This would encourage and enable more ministers of religion and other members of their communities to become active agents of the project. This could be achieved by linking individual mosques or temples with Christian churches and encouraging exchange visits and the development of lasting positive relationships.

Conclusion.

The Interfaith Forum is clearly very effective in building good community relations across cultural and religious divides. It is a most valuable partner to the Local Authority in responding to inter-community tensions or conflict. It is able to be self-reflective and to change its approach to counter structural weaknesses or to respond more effectively to new challenges. It harnesses a whole array of voluntary expertise and influences a very wide and diverse audience.

(Rev) Philip T. Sumner, M.C.L., L.C.L., R.D.
Oldham Interfaith Forum, January 2018