

Essex Faith Covenant – overview (as at 15.08.18)

Context/background

The Essex Faith Covenant was formally launched at an event at FirstSite in Colchester in October 2017. The launch was attended by over 120 delegates from a broad range of faith, voluntary and public sector backgrounds. The Essex Faith Covenant is a joint commitment to a shared set of principles that guide engagement between faith communities and public services. It aims to promote open, practical working and strengthen community cohesion.

The principles are:

- Faith communities are free to practice their beliefs and religious observances, and to raise their voice in public debate and to be respected, within the framework of UK law.
- Public services and faith-based social action should respect service users from all backgrounds, without discrimination.
- The voice, participation and solutions that faith communities bring are important and good engagement with the public services should enable them to be brought to bear for the benefit of the wider community.

Both faith groups and public services signatories committed to work together to:

- Pro-actively build relationships and trust between faith groups and public services
- Create opportunities to raise awareness and share learning and knowledge between different faith communities, and within the public services
- Seek opportunities to bring people together to serve the community, particularly the most disadvantaged

The Approach

The Essex Faith Covenant Steering Group (EFCSG), which is broadly representative of all the organisations and faith groups that are signed up to the Essex Faith Covenant, has continued to provide oversight and support the pilot areas in developing and showcasing activity and best practice. Both faith groups and public services will use the Essex Faith Covenant Steering Group as a tool to develop activity around uniting communities to better serve Essex residents. It was agreed to initially establish four pilot areas: Basildon, Braintree, Chelmsford and Colchester.

These areas agreed to:

- Adopt the principles set out within the Essex Faith Covenant
- Agree local activity to address the over-arching theme of **tackling loneliness, isolation and disadvantage.**

The theme itself compliments the shared long term **Vision for Essex**, particularly the ambition for strengthening communities through participation and tackling disadvantage.

Work is being coordinated to capture the activities over the pilot areas which will support the activities.

Progress recorded to date (since launch):

- The Essex Faith Covenant Steering Group (EFCSG) has been expanded¹, and the relationship between Essex County Council (ECC) and pilot district representatives has been strengthened significantly.
 - It was agreed to initially establish four pilot areas in the following districts: Basildon, Braintree, Chelmsford and Colchester.
 - Maldon have since signed up to the Covenant and Maldon District Council are working with faith partners to identify and tackle local health and wellbeing needs including obesity, frailty and old age, isolation and mental health. Specifically, a targeted project is being undertaken with Faith groups to reduce loneliness & isolation in rural areas of Maldon.
 - Active Essex (and partners) have recently signed up to the Covenant. More about Active Essex and the signing can be found here: <http://www.essexfuture.org.uk/news-and-events/essex-sports-organisations-support-faith-covenant/>
 - Rochford District Council are also interested in becoming involved and working towards the aims of the Covenant, although do have some reservations around the use of the term 'covenant' in this setting. They are attending the next steering group meeting and it is expected will have involvement going forward (even if they do not become a formal signatory as such), although the communications around their involvement may have to reference a 'Faith Agreement' (or similar) rather than 'Covenant'.
- Basildon Borough Council has reviewed its community funding criteria to make it easier for faith groups to receive funding for local community activities from April 2018.
- Essex County Council has taken a facilitative approach in relation to engagement with Mosques in the pilot areas. Following an initial meeting in early 2018, ECC and mosque representatives are hoping to recommence discussions to explore the development of a Muslim Council for Essex in the coming months.
- The Office of the Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner (OPFCC), have been working increasingly with faith groups and have been heavily involved in coordinating the 'Cinnamon project' which aims to help churches to transform communities by reaching out and building relationships with those in greatest need reduce isolation by working with existing communities to tackle key issues such as hate crime, anti-social behaviour, and safeguarding potentially vulnerable older victims against fraud. The spread of the project currently extends to two of the four Essex Faith Covenant pilot areas, Colchester & Chelmsford, as well as Rayleigh & Frinton.
- Essex County Council led a workshop session at the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's Conference on the 15th March 2018. The workshop offered

¹ The full list of organisations represented on the EFCSG (as at June 2018) are Essex County Council, Essex Police, Essex County Fire & Rescue Service, Office for the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner in Essex (OPFCC), North East Essex Foundation Trust (NELFT), Braintree District Council, Chelmsford City Council, Basildon Borough Council, Colchester Borough Council, Maldon District Council, and representatives from Beacon House Ministries, Braintree, Chelmsford and Colchester Mosques, South Essex Islamic Trust, the Chelmsford Jewish community and Chelmsford Cathedral. Active Essex have since signed up to the Faith Covenant in July 2018.

participants the opportunity to learn more about, and contribute to the development of the Essex Faith Covenant, as well as asking delegates to think about what they can practically do to promote trust and understanding between public services and faith communities and what steps they could take to develop joint activities that aim to tackle isolation and disadvantage.

- Vivienne Wiggins, Chief Executive of Beacon House (a Colchester-based Christian charity established to help homeless people), has been chairing the steering group from June this year, and will do so for 12 months with the chair will rotate on an annual basis (<http://www.essexfuture.org.uk/news-and-events/new-chair-for-essex-faith-covenant-group/>). ECC are providing the secretariat.
 - It was agreed at the last steering group meeting in June that the theme of social isolation, loneliness and disadvantage would remain in place for two years, to ensure sufficient time for activity around this theme to develop and show impact.
 - Work is ongoing to map faith activity across the pilot areas that support the principles and themes laid out within the Faith Covenant. A more accurate picture of interfaith/faith based activity in these districts will emerge as this mapping exercise develops. A key area for the EFCSG is to highlight and publicise some of the excellent faith-led and partnership work contributing to tackling loneliness and social isolation; as such, a number of case studies are in development (in Maldon and Basildon initially).
 - Whilst it was agreed at the last steering group that it would be too early to hold a 'celebration event' one year on from the launch, an event will be planned for the first half of 2019.
 - At the next steering group meeting in early October, the group will discuss EFCSG communications and activity related to Inter Faith Week (Sunday 11 – Sunday 18 November 2018).