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# RELIGION AND BELIEF: DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT

December 2006

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**A RESEARCH REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE EQUALITY  
AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION TRANSITION TEAM**

**WRITTEN BY  
BRAP**

December 2006

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## PREFACE

This report addresses a potentially challenging area of discussion...religion and belief. In particular it focuses on approaches for engaging those with non-religious or minority religious views in discussions informing public policy. The project has been commissioned to address legislative provisions within the religion and belief strand. It recognises that the 'constituency' of this strand is far broader than 'religion' and includes those who have non-religious beliefs.

Yet developing approaches to equality that incorporate both religious and non-religious perspectives is not always comfortable for those involved and will not always be easy. We recognise that it may be difficult - especially if one has particularly strong feelings about the inclusion or exclusion of religion or belief as part of public policy making - to read this report without 'reaction'.

Whilst disagreement and debate about the motivation for this report and its findings are inevitable, we hope that this remains an open debate. One that is not driven primarily by an interest in ensuring the dominance of a particular religion or belief in the public sphere, but one that encourages new ways of disagreeing that reflect a commitment to understanding a diversity of views. We refer here to a space in which we are 'humans' first, and people with religion or belief second.

In some cases this will require us to 'let go' of views that have precluded that kind of debate in the past. After all, is this not one of the key challenges of developing a human rights approach to progressing equality? A challenge that will not only have to be brokered by the religion and belief strand, but across all equality strands of age, sexual orientation, 'race', disability and sex.

As we develop new approaches to engagement and debate that recognise and respect the diversity and scope of the religion and belief strand, we anticipate that we may also begin to see new and unexpected alliances being formed, surprising conversations and imaginative possibilities for debating social issues (both within the strand and between equality strands).

brap  
December 2006

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Readers are encouraged to read the full report in addition to this summary as some issues and themes are explored in greater depth in the body of the report, especially in section 5.0.

### (a) Background and Context

brap, Birmingham's lead strategic agency for equality, was commissioned by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) Transition Team to undertake a short research project examining religion and belief representation in Scotland, Wales and the English Regions. In particular, the research was to examine, assess and report on three distinct areas:

- The role of regional administrative bodies in preparing for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, including consulting on and delivering the religion and belief strand.
- The preparation for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights by regional equalities and inter-faith networks and the nature of their interaction with non-religious groups and individuals.
- The nature of the participation of non-religious groups and individuals in public consultation; any barriers to their participation and engagement, and what key stakeholders can do to overcome these.

The research was prompted by concerns that existing representational structures - both nationally and at the regional level - did not adequately engage with groups and individuals representing non-religious views and positions, or minority religious groups.

The research focused on four groups of stakeholders: regional administrative bodies; equality and human rights networks; inter-faith networks; and non-religious groups and individuals. Our findings indicate a number of barriers and challenges that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is likely to encounter in developing inclusive approaches to the regional engagement of these constituencies, both with particular reference to the religion and belief strand but also perhaps more broadly too.

### (b) An Overview of Key Issues

#### *Regional bodies*

**Government Offices for the Regions** While already engaged in work to further the 'faith and cohesion' agenda, only around half of Government Offices for the Regions are aware of non-religious groups and none have sought to consult these groups directly. Some, however, are aware of the need to expand the representation of minority religious groups. There is also significant confusion regarding which precise policy issues legitimately require consultation with religious groups and which do not.

Regional Assemblies lack clear guidance on inclusive representational and consultative models and none have consulted directly with non-religious groups.

**Regional Development Agencies** RDAs are currently engaging with religious groups and in the case of previously excluded or under-represented religious groups are keen to do more. There is little if any awareness, however, of non-religious groups nor how they might be reached. Minority religious groups and non-religious groups would currently find it difficult to engage with Regional Development Agencies unless already represented within an existing inter-faith network. Many RDAs consider that they will need assistance if they are to engage directly with non-religious groups.

Virtually all regional bodies tend to share the view that it is the voluntary and community sector's responsibility to 'deliver' religious (and non-religious) engagement. Meeting these expectations will be extremely difficult for the voluntary and community sector.

### ***Equalities and human rights networks***

Equalities and human rights networks are at very different stages of development across England, Scotland and Wales. Their existing relationships with inter-faith networks are well-developed, but there is little contact with minority religious groups and none with non-religious groups. Many share the view that it is the responsibility of inter-faith networks to 'deliver' both greater religious diversity and - where and if appropriate - non-religious representation.

Non-religious participation is also seen as inherently problematical because non-religious individuals, with the exception of those who explicitly define themselves as humanists and secularists, are by and large unorganised: they lack the resources and capacity (and in some cases the inclination) to engage on policy issues and in any case offer no immediate mechanisms whereby their views can be sought. There is also an overwhelming view that the religion and belief strand is primarily about organised religious groups.

### ***Inter-faith networks***

There is a huge diversity in the size, remit and activities of inter-faith networks with key differences in three main areas: in their desire to engage in influencing public policy; in their existing levels of engagement with public policy issues; and in their capacity and expertise to engage with public policy issues. No existing regional inter-faith networks have non-religious groups or individuals in membership and there are widely divergent views on whether it is practicable (or 'right') for inter-faith networks to include the non-religious. On balance opinion appears to be against this.

Inter-faith networks also have widely differing views about what constitutes a 'non-religious group' and currently not all even accept the central conception of a religion and belief strand, in which equivalence between religion and belief is presupposed. In this respect there is still a huge 'educational' task to be done in fostering a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of this aspect of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' work.

### ***Non-religious groups and individuals***

In terms of organised groupings adhering to a 'system' of non-religious belief, only the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society are numerically significant. There are no significant organised groups representing any great numbers of other non-religious positions.

Of the local humanist and secular societies it is only a tiny minority that have had any systematic contact with either equalities and human rights networks or regional administrative bodies.

On the ground, the majority of those non-religious groups that do exist have most in common with the vast bulk of non-professionalised, grassroots community organisations: they share a similar lack of time, capacity and resources, and frequently have an ageing or older membership and relative under-representation of younger age groups. In addition, many feel they are not operating on a level playing field with organised religious groups.

## (c) Conclusions

Our conclusions can be summarised under four main headings:

- a) Developing practical and appropriate engagement mechanisms.
- b) Awareness, understanding and recognition: the 'added value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.
- c) Identifying and using evidence.
- d) Developing capacity, access and communication.

### (i) *Developing Practical and Appropriate Engagement Mechanisms*

The fundamental issue for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights at the regional level will be that of developing inclusive and appropriate engagement models that are fit for purpose. Before this can be done, it is therefore necessary *to clarify that purpose*. For example, is regional engagement essentially an issue of representation? Or is the objective rather to develop engagement models that can contribute *expertise and strategic guidance* in keeping with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' proposed core functions of:

- Promoting and encouraging good equalities practice
- Working to eliminate unlawful discrimination
- Monitoring the effectiveness of legislation
- Promoting an understanding of the importance of good relations
- And identifying areas where social and institutional change is necessary and the outcomes which will achieve this change

If the purpose is the latter then engagement with stakeholders from the religion and belief strand should reflect this, offering the capability to provide the Commission for Equality and Human Rights with expertise and evidence to identify and prevent discrimination against those with religious or non-religious beliefs. Our research shows, however, that at present regional approaches to engagement are *overwhelmingly concerned with representation* and as a consequence are primarily modelled on 'group representation'. They do not seek to assemble specific skills, aptitudes or expertise at the regional level; 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 widely 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 speaking from their own experience represents the views of a wider community
- And they tend to emphasise identity over expertise.

This ignores the differences that exist within minority groups (whether defined by ethnicity, culture or religion or indeed a mixture of all three), such as nationality, class, gender, cultural and religious interpretations, sexual orientation, age and disability.

And yet there is a common assumption that a broader, more inclusive engagement process will help to develop better equality practice at a regional level. We have seen little evidence to suggest this is true. Indeed, as a potential 'tool' for garnering expertise and evidence to identify and prevent discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, 'group representation' models may well be at odds with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' purposes. Rather than ensuring that individuals are in a position to share evidence of discrimination and advocate innovative solutions to reducing that discrimination, group representation models may reinforce a tendency for individuals to define themselves by their ethnic, cultural and religious differences, seeing other groups as competitors rather than allies in a common struggle for equality.

A distinction therefore needs to be made between *engagement* and *representation* and one possible way to do this is by placing a much clearer emphasis on what we might call 'strategic guidance'. The starting point in this model is that people's opinions are sought because of their expertise and aptitudes rather than because they are a particular ethnicity or religion. The purpose of engagement in this instance is consultation rather than representation. In this model, 'advocates' (rather than representatives) for issues of religion or belief might be selected by interview rather than election or self-appointment. Advocates would be invited to contribute regional or local intelligence, views and advice derived from their expertise and knowledge.

We believe that competence in equalities is a learned skill and in the context of stakeholders for the religion and belief strand the necessary skills 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.
- A good understanding of the role of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and a willingness to learn.
- An ability to identify and analyse evidence of religion or belief discrimination.

If the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' purpose for engaging with stakeholders from the religion and belief strand at a regional level is to understand the nature of discrimination in this area and identify good practice to prevent it, then a strategic guidance model would offer clear advantages over a group representation model.

A good example of where this type of approach has been adopted is in the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Steering Group.



The potential exists for similar types of Religion and Belief groups to be established at a regional level to inform the work of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. At present inter-faith and/or multi-faith networks tend to be the main mechanisms for regional engagement and some thought would need to be given to the logistics of identifying smaller 'strategic guidance' Religion and Belief groups which, while perhaps drawn from existing networks, are separate to them and working to objectives which have been mutually agreed both by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and regional stakeholders. Consideration would also need to be given to individuals' training, capacity-building, support and remuneration.

This would require a much more co-ordinated approach to developing appropriate engagement mechanisms at the regional level than has so far been possible during this transitional period.

***(ii) Awareness, Understanding and Recognition: the 'Added Value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights***

There is a lack of awareness of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and its objectives at a regional level and in particular widespread uncertainty regarding:

- The specific objectives, purpose and rationale of the religion and belief strand.
- What cross-strand working will 'look like'.
- And the use of human rights principles to inform equalities practice.

Many of those challenges relate directly to differences in perspectives and awareness between the four groups of stakeholders we interviewed. Thus an underlying challenge is how best to share information between these stakeholders and develop more co-ordinated approaches to these issues.

While many are aware that equalities strands have merged, and that there will be a regional presence, this is a structural rather than an intellectual 'fix' and much remains to be done in terms of justifying, explaining and promoting the cross-strand equalities model and in particular the rationale for the Religion and Belief strand. The establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and the merging of six equalities strands and human rights also offers opportunities that have previously been missing in UK equalities practice. But this 'added value' is not yet widely understood or appreciated at the regional level. These new models for equalities practice require transformational thinking as well as transformational structures or mechanisms and at present attention is focused on the latter largely to the exclusion of the former. This needs to change.

A cross-stand approach may also help us to understand the degree to which groups actually share particular forms of inequality or oppression. For example, non-religious and religious groups may in fact share some aspects of inequality and could find ways of joining together in common cause. Indeed, groups from different equality strands may join together as they find the causes of their inequality are shared. Yet finding people willing - and able - to enter into debates like these and creating an enabling environment for such debates will be a huge challenge. It will require groups and individuals to 'let go' of particular interests they may have, including the desire to perpetuate conventional approaches to resolving equalities issues at a national or regional level. At the moment, the kind of 'letting go' required for cross-strand working and the trust and mutuality which are a prerequisite for its establishment are not even near.

***(iii) Identifying and Using Evidence***

There are particular issues in the religion and belief strand regarding evidence and the use of evidence. Unlike gender, race or disability, the religion and belief strand is relatively new and its purpose and parameters not widely understood. As a consequence, our understanding of discrimination (both levels and kinds) on the grounds of religion and/or belief is not well-developed. There are additional problems too: 'mapping' religious and especially non-religious groups is problematical; the precise role of religion and belief in self-identity is extremely fluid; and in terms of discrimination, it is widely acknowledged that other factors - class, gender, nationality, cultural practices - may also play a big part in addition to religion and/or belief.

For these reasons, developing an evidence base to support our understanding of discrimination on the grounds of religion and/or belief is of primary importance and engagement at the regional level has a potentially important role to play in assisting this. We need, for example, to better understand when religion and belief are not the key factors, and we need to be able to triangulate and compare the views and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders in the religion and belief strand with other forms of evidence. Representational models founded of 'group representation' (or community or interest group representation) are not best suited to assisting this analysis.

There is a clear challenge, then, both in building the evidence base and in assisting stakeholders to acquire the skills and expertise which will help them identify, contribute and analyse appropriate evidence. This also points to the need to develop a much clearer rationale to underpin consultation on the grounds of religion or belief.

Developing better evidence on religious and belief discrimination and sharing this more effectively between equality strands (and stakeholders) should help to identify those areas and issues where religion and belief expertise is both legitimate and required.

***(iv) Developing Capacity, Access and Communication***

Simply ensuring the representation of greater numbers of excluded groups (religious or non-religious) in regional engagement and representative structures will not necessarily guarantee either more progressive equality practices at the regional level, or the greater availability of robust evidence and data. Hence our emphasis on what we have termed strategic guidance approaches rather than 'group representation'.

And yet if approaches based on strategic guidance are to be inclusive and accessible to those with a broad range of perspectives (and from different backgrounds), there is a real need to make sure support is provided both to individuals who might wish to get involved and to minority religious and non-religious groups, where capacity, resources and sometimes the necessary expertise are extremely limited. Many regional stakeholders will see this as critical to establishing a level playing field which does not favour established, organised religious groups over all others.

And yet, it does appear that a wider range of people do want to get involved. The National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association jointly have advertised for non-religious individuals who can "represent the interests of people with non-religious beliefs to government agencies" and in the one-and-a-half months in which the advertisements have been circulating over 200 people have expressed an interest.

It is evident, therefore, that the numbers willing to be involved are significant and this is encouraging. But the costs and logistics of providing training, support, capacity-building and other forms of assistance to enable not just effective engagement but a meaningful contribution amongst these stakeholders will represent a major challenge. This will be as much of an issue for regional administrative bodies - which will need to establish viable terms of reference and codes of conduct for religious and non-religious engagement - as it will for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and its incoming Board. In particular, the process of developing an enabling environment that makes it possible for groups including religious, minority religious and non-religious perspectives to discuss even the most contentious issues has yet to begin.

The biggest challenges remain those of: getting appropriate people around the table; developing confidence, skills and expertise and building skills where these are lacking; and challenging and changing existing practices while also building trust and mutuality.

**(d) Recommendations**

***(i) Developing Practical and Appropriate Engagement Mechanisms***

Working in conjunction with statutory and voluntary regional stakeholders, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should:

- a) Develop alternative spaces and/or forums where Religion and Belief stakeholders can come together. While additional to existing inter-faith and equalities and human rights networks, these smaller groups would be complementary 'sub-sets' of both, with their participants reflecting both religious and non-religious perspectives. (If non-religious participation in existing inter-faith networks remains a sticking point then Religion and belief 'sub-groups' could be helpful in offering a 'neutral' space for 'mixed' discussion/input.)
- b) Identify Religion and Belief sub-group participants by interview rather than election or self-appointment. In this way, emphasis could be placed on seeking particular skill-sets, expertise and competence rather than religious, cultural or ethnic 'identity'.
- c) Ensure that any interview processes are accessible (in terms of resources and time) and target a broad range of expertise/skills so those with competence in related areas can still get involved.
- d) Ensure that the purpose of these sub-groups is widely understood and that there is an emphasis on:
  - Building an evidence base regarding religion and belief discrimination;
  - Sharing skills and experience in a spirit of mutuality and shared endeavour;
  - And creating a space where difficult equalities issues can be discussed and resolved.
- e) Work with equalities networks and regional administrative bodies to:
  - Develop a constituency for and trust in the Religion and Belief sub-groups;

- And encourage inter-faith networks (in particular) to engage with these alternative forums.

***(ii) Awareness, Understanding and Recognition: the 'Added Value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights***

Working through the proposed Religion and Belief sub-groups, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should:

- a) Make concerted efforts to 'market' the 'added value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights to stakeholders in the region, and in doing this expand the constituency for these ideas and encourage wider 'buy in'.
- b) Encourage equalities networks and agencies and regional administrative bodies to:
  - Explore the application of human rights principles to equalities work;
  - And explore possibilities for cross-equality strand analysis and action.
- c) Work more proactively with and seek to fund more work by organisations that are already exploring these new ways of working.
- d) Encourage work that thinks more critically, creatively, and innovatively, and which seeks to remove past labels and 'boxes' by moving away from interest group-led equalities to models that emphasise our shared humanity.

***(iii) Identifying and Using Evidence***

Working through the proposed Religion and Belief sub-groups and with other statutory and voluntary regional partners, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should:

- a) Commission work and activities that can assist in building the evidence and knowledge base of religion or belief discrimination and how it interacts with other issues (e.g. race, class, gender).
- b) Assist in 'triangulating' the regional stakeholders' input with fresh evidence and data as a means of developing robust evidence-driven reasons for policy interventions.
- c) Assist the proposed Religion and Belief sub-groups (which can in turn work with other regional partners/stakeholders) to develop clear rationale and guidance for when religion and belief perspectives are legitimate and/or required (e.g. in which policy areas, contexts or initiatives).

***(iv) Developing Capacity, Access and Communication***

There is a clear argument for additional resources and support (training, capacity-building etc) to help build skills at the regional level. However, there is a legitimate discussion to be had regarding whether 'delivery' is the role of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights or a regional voluntary sector role - especially as there seems such a widespread assumption at the regional level that promoting greater diversity in religious (or non-religious) representation is the responsibility of the voluntary sector.

Perhaps, in the absence of some of the specifics about how the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will operate at the regional level, the clearest case that can be made at the moment is that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should adopt an enabling role, working to secure funding and other resources where necessary so that the work of regional stakeholders can be better supported, with specific regional/local delivery arrangements to be considered in due course.

Work in this area should include:

- a) Equal recognition for funding purposes of religious minority and non-religious groups. (It should also be noted that funding sources for this work should focus solely on enabling such groups to build their capacity and expertise specifically with regard to engaging with regional partners and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights regionally and nationally rather than on requiring them to develop 'spurious' service delivery functions as a means of securing resources.)
- b) Ensuring equality of access to information, to regional decision-making processes and to opportunities to work with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights at a regional level.
- c) Support for the work of the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society in their efforts to build engagement, skills and knowledge of non-religious participants interested in getting involved.
- d) Building skills, knowledge and expertise of non-religious and religious to engage in a non-confrontational way on contentious issues. This might include mediation and conflict resolution techniques or customised 'advocacy' courses to develop a new cohort of regional advocates on religion and belief issues.
- e) Support for regional administrative bodies, equality networks and inter-faith networks to:
  - Establish safe, neutral environments where contentious issues can be discussed;
  - Support (especially for regional administrative bodies) to develop clearer guidance on inclusive engagement and consultation as well as clear rationale for which policy areas require the input of religion and belief perspectives.



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

brap, Birmingham's lead strategic agency for equality, was commissioned by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Team to undertake a short research project examining religion and belief representation in Scotland, Wales and the English Regions following the invitation to tender circulated in July 2006.

In particular, the research was commissioned to examine a perceived deficit in existing representational structures - both nationally and at the regional level - of groups and individuals representing non-religious views and positions. By filling some of that perceived evidence gap this research aims to support the provision of options for the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights board.

There is also a concern that existing structures may exclude some minority religious groups. This apparent deficit in the evidence base is felt to be of especial importance to the development of the religion and belief strand in Britain, but looked at more broadly, our research suggests that there are also a number of other underlying issues that have implications for the representational and consultative models and approaches the Commission for Equality and Human Rights may adopt more generally in its work, governance and accountability practices. We explore these briefly in establishing the wider context for this work in section 3.0.

In addition, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Team is aware that discussions about the potential shape of a Commission for Equality and Human Rights regional presence are at differential stages of development and so this research has also included a basic mapping and analysis of these preparations.

Something must also be said about the inherent limitations of such research. Firstly, the relatively short timescale of 30 days over three months to map and analyse such a broad topic in England, Scotland and Wales necessarily precluded an in-depth analysis of all groups in all areas of Britain. We have been able to overcome this particular limitation to some extent by conducting three more detailed 'case studies' in Scotland (nationally) and England (the West Midlands and South West), where we undertook significantly more detailed interviews to explore more fully any specific regional dynamics that exist in religious and non-religious engagement in policy-making.

But a more inherent limitation in exploring religious and non-religious views must also be recognised. Some groups, such as 'inter-faith networks', contain an extremely wide diversity of opinion - even amongst those who ostensibly share the same religion - and for this reason it will always be difficult to arrive at a definitive 'consensus' view amongst such groups and/or networks. This reinforces our understanding that while it may be convenient to regard society as comprising distinct religious or belief 'communities', these are composed of individuals whose views, experiences and values are always more complex than any label that might be used to categorise them.

## 2.0 APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights plans to have a regional presence in England, Scotland and Wales. Work is being done by others in preparation for engagement with the new Commission around what that regional presence might look like. Approaches to this preparation differ between regions and nations. A number of regions have developed, or are planning to develop, equalities networks (incorporating 6 equality strands) that could potentially play a role in driving forward this work. Some structures are completely new, whereas others incorporate already existing agencies and networks. Whilst it will be for the incoming Commission's Board to decide what its regional presence will look like, regional administrative bodies such as Regional Assemblies, Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies have played a role in preparing regions for engaging with the Commission to develop that regional presence.

In terms of religion and belief, inter-faith networks have played an important part in bringing together groups from different religions to discuss religious issues and lobby at a regional level. The networks and/or agencies that may work in partnership with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' regionally and nationally will be likely to use intermediary organisations such as inter-faith networks to build evidence on the religion and belief strand in the future.

With this proposed landscape in mind, we focused our research and especially our interviewing on four key groups of stakeholders relevant to the aims of the project:

- Regional Administrative bodies (and national public agencies).
- Equalities networks
- Inter-faith networks.
- Non-religious groups and individuals and minority religious groups and individuals.

Working through these stakeholder groups, we have pursued the three main aims of this project:

- To identify how non-religious groups and individuals might contribute effectively to equality bodies and networks (including inter-faith networks) in Scotland, Wales and the English regions.
- To assist the Commission for Equality and Human Rights in its work with stakeholders and partners to ensure that representational provision within the religion and belief strand is sufficiently inclusive.
- And to identify religious groups that may be excluded from equality networks.

To achieve these aims we have undertaken research at a regional and national level to compare, triangulate and map the views of the three stakeholder groups outlined above with particular reference to:

- Identifying the nature and extent of non-religious and minority religious engagement in public policy-making (both groups and individuals) at a regional level.
- Identifying any barriers to engagement amongst these groups at a regional level.



- Supporting regional agencies to improve approaches to the engagement of these groups.

**Primary research:** Our primary research has included extensive semi-structured interviews (both telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews) and workshops with inter-faith and equality networks, administrative bodies and non-religious groups and individuals. The key purpose of these interviews was: first, to identify how non-religious groups and individuals might contribute effectively to inter-faith and equality bodies; and second, to make recommendations to the incoming Board about how provision for engagement within the religion and belief strand is sufficiently inclusive. Whilst minority religious groups have been interviewed as part of this project, emphasis in primary research and the project overall has been placed on non-religious engagement. This approach was agreed with the Project Steering Group.

**Secondary research:** Our secondary research included literature reviews of:

- Relevant policy documents detailing the emerging thinking and institutional arrangements for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights in the regions.
- Examples of regional body consultation with Religion and belief strand stakeholders.
- Government guidance regarding consultation with Religion and belief strand stakeholders.

In both our primary and secondary research we have sought to explore three dimensions:

- The role of regional administrative bodies in preparing for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, including consulting on and delivering the religion and belief strand.
- The preparation for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights by regional equalities and inter-faith networks and the nature of their interaction with non-religious groups and individuals.
- The nature of the participation of non-religious groups and individuals in public consultation; any barriers to their participation and engagement, and what key stakeholders can do to overcome these.

In total, we conducted 72 interviews, 3 regional case studies, and 2 workshops as detailed in the table below:

Interviews		
Regional Administrative Bodies	Government Offices, Regional Assemblies, Regional Development Agencies, Scottish Executive	12
Equalities networks	Proposed central role in Commission for Equality and Human Rights regional presence	
	• North East	1
	• West Midlands	1
	• South West	1

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scotland</li> <li>• Wales</li> </ul>	1 1
	Other 'Equalities Networks' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• London</li> <li>• Scotland</li> <li>• West Midlands</li> <li>• East of England</li> </ul>	1 1 1 1
Inter-faith networks	England, Scotland, Wales	12
Non-religious: Members of humanist groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South East England</li> <li>• South West England</li> <li>• Midlands</li> <li>• North East England</li> <li>• North West England</li> <li>• Scotland</li> <li>• Wales</li> </ul>	8 1 4 1 2 5 2
Non-religious: other	Non-religious individuals and National Secular Society	6
Minority Religious groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scotland</li> <li>• Wales</li> <li>• South West England</li> <li>• North West England</li> <li>• North East England</li> <li>• South East England</li> <li>• London</li> <li>• West Midlands</li> </ul>	1 1 1 1 1 1 2 1
<b>Regional case studies</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South West England</li> <li>• West Midlands</li> <li>• Scotland</li> </ul>	1 1 1
<b>Workshops</b>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South West</li> <li>• West Midlands</li> </ul>	1 1

Our starting point throughout has been a human rights perspective which recognises the rights of people to religion and belief, while also recognising that the expression of that right might sometimes need to be curtailed if it is preventing other members of society from enjoying their rights in a disproportionate way. The overall methodology of this project was agreed by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Team and relevant stakeholders of the project.

### ***A note on terminology***

In this report we use the term 'non-religious' to refer to those that do not believe God exists and would emphasise the explanatory power of a 'non-supernatural' worldview. In the past non-religiousness has been described in a multitude of ways. Non-religiousness can be seen as a 'belief' or a specific ideological stance (rather than the simple *absence* of belief in God). It may also refer to the absence of belief in God with (or without) a conscious rejection of it.

In this project we refer to those people that may approach non-religiousness in either way. When we refer to non-religious people's engagement with regional policy making, we refer to those people that may be interested in representing or articulating that non-religious viewpoint to inform regional policy. Thus we are not referring to all groups and individuals that are not religious (e.g. vegetarians, or the Women's Institute), but instead to those that have a specifically non-religious outlook or perspective.

### 3.0 RELIGIOUS AND NON-RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATION: CONTEXT AND CRITICAL ISSUES

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 delivery.<sup>1</sup> This latter development can be seen very clearly as following trends in the US.<sup>2</sup>

This is not a strand of public policy that has met with universal approval, however. Some feel that the growing emphasis on public service delivery by faith-based and third sector organisations - evident across a range of New Labour policy initiatives but more recently also confirmed as a key plank in any future Cameron-led Conservative government - marks a retreat to a pre-welfare state model of provision dependent on charitable and religious philanthropy.<sup>3</sup> There is also widespread concern that the growing influence of religious groups marks a 'desecularisation' of the public space. This was particularly the case following the Sikh demonstrations against the Birmingham Rep's production of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play, *Behzti*, during 2004.

As well as the potential to create a more generally conservative ideological climate, this heightened public religiosity also seems to be prompting a greater self-identification with religion. For example, a recent study found that in the UK the proportion of White British describing themselves as Christians rather than non-religious was higher in districts with larger Muslim populations.<sup>4</sup>

The use of religion as a signifier of 'identity' has been a centrepiece of multiculturalist policies for over two decades, with groups encouraged to emphasise not just their ethnic but also their religious identity as a means of securing resources and influence. But the potential for such policies to foster competition between communities - rather than a shared understanding of their exclusion and disadvantage and a collective attempt to address these problems - is now widely acknowledged and to a large degree has prompted the current community cohesion debate and perhaps indeed the establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. While multiculturalism may have helped to raise the profile of some

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Working Together', Home Office [2004] and 'Working with the Third Sector', National Audit Office [2005] at <http://www.nao.org.uk/pn/05-06/050675.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Texas Workforce at <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/svcs/chchoice/chchoice.html>. Former Governor Bush created a Faith-Based Task Force in May 1996 to survey the legal and regulatory landscape for faith-based groups operating in Texas with a view to identifying and removing obstacles to their operation and recommending ways in which Texas could create an environment in which these groups could thrive, 'free of regulations that dilute the "faith factor"'. Subsequently, on 29/01/01, President Bush issued Executive Order 13198 creating Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in five cabinet departments – in Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Labor, and Justice. See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci/>

<sup>3</sup> See *Compassionate Conservatism sounds uncannily familiar*, Polly Toynbee, Guardian 13/06/06: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,1796111,00.html>

<sup>4</sup> See Voas, D., Bruce, S., *Research note: The 2001 census and Christian identification in Britain*, in 'Journal of Contemporary Religion, Volume 19, Number 1, [January 2004]. See also See Kaufman, E., *The Slow Death of Secularism*, 'Prospect Magazine' [November, 2006].

excluded groups, it has been less successful in producing lasting solutions to entrenched patterns of inequality on issues like employment.<sup>5</sup>

But these are more general social difficulties and they are for the most part widely acknowledged. What is perhaps less recognised and more pertinent to this work are the structural and conceptual problems associated with religious and non-religious *representation*. Our research has identified three key issues:

**Problems of definition:** There are problems, first of all, in defining the term 'non-religious'. Certainly, as our interviews have amply illustrated, not all groups or individuals subscribe to a single definition of the term. In any case it could be argued non-religious individuals - perhaps unlike religious people, whatever their religion - are more likely to manifest their 'non-religiousness' in response to particular issues or debates rather than as an over-riding determinant of individual identity, as the key to what 'makes them tick'.<sup>6</sup>

**Organised and non-organised:** 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 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 and mosques.

The same cannot be said, however, of non-religious groups. Except in the case of a small number of mainly national organisations (with local sub-groups), such as the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society, many non-religious people are not organised according to, nor motivated primarily by, their 'non-religiousness'. (For example, although the British Humanist Association once ran a Housing Association, Adoption Agency and Counselling Service at a time when such services were available primarily through religious organisations, it eventually handed all three over into mainstream secular provision for this very reason.) An inability to 'characterise' or 'group' non-religious individuals has led in some cases to an inherent failure of the system to identify non-religious people with 'good works' of the type ascribed to religious groups. Yet while non-religious individuals express no organised religious affiliation, the voluntary social or political activity they engage in can be motivated by the widest possible range of social justice values, ethics and beliefs. But even these values will necessarily represent a 'common bond'; indeed, it is far more common in the voluntary and community sector to find individuals - volunteers in a credit union, for example - submerging their individual beliefs and concerns in the shared activity of providing a service for the common good. **There are, then, conceptual, organisational and practical problems in seeking to identify non-religious groups able to act as representational counterparts to faith-based voluntary sector organisations.**

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<sup>5</sup> Malik, K., *Against Multiculturalism*, 'New Humanist', June 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Also religious people do not always see religion as an important part of their identity. In 2001 only 20% of the UK population considered their religion important to their self-identify. See *Home Office Citizenship Survey*, p.18, Home Office [2001].

**Narrow representational models:** It must also be said that operating narrow representational models based on religion - as on ethnicity - also runs the risk of entrenching and reinforcing a kind of 'respectable sectarianism' that runs entirely counter to current human rights-based thinking in equality circles. This may suggest that there is also a need to consider more broadly the way the right to religion and belief is exercised in society. The underlying human rights principle of 'proportionality' means that in some cases our own rights to express religion and belief may need to be tempered if these have a disproportionate and damaging impact on the rights of others. This is particularly significant as the Commission for Equality and Human Rights considers the development of working across equality strands. The gender and sexual orientation aspects of Commission for Equality and Human Rights' work, for instance, might be a source of conflict for some religious groups or individuals.

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The Commission for Equality and Human Rights is particularly well placed to reflect critically on these issues and to pioneer new approaches to representation, engagement and consultation as it develops the religion and belief strand of its work. And yet traditionally in Britain, interpretation of this particular function has tended to place greatest emphasis on protecting and promoting the 'organised religion' rather than the 'belief' aspect. This will need rebalancing, we feel, if the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is to avoid perpetuating a situation in which competing groups are constantly lobbying in order to have their 'voice' heard. This will involve recognising the limits of both representation and consultation more generally. Narrow representational models requiring a definitive view of religion and belief are unlikely to be achievable.

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights is in a position to recognise the complexity of human identity and to adopt models of representation and engagement that are correspondingly nuanced. We hope that this report will assist in that process.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

### 4.1 Preparation for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights

#### 4.1.1 Proposed Regional and National Structures for Commission for Equality and Human Rights' Presence

##### *England*

A significant proportion of the work done so far in exploring the nature of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' regional presence has been commissioned and/or overseen by the Women and Equality Unit (within the Department for Communities and Local Government). For example, the Women and Equality Unit commissioned a substantial 'location study' to help determine office location and this was published in November 2005.

The Women and Equality Unit suggests that, "The guiding principles for the development of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights regional presence will be strategic and flexible delivery, respecting and recognising the experience and expertise of others and understanding regional needs".<sup>7</sup> The Women and Equality Unit acknowledges that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' regional presence in England may take a number of different forms, with regions exploring different forms of partnership and co-location most suited to their situation. Nonetheless it believes that emphasis should be on the strategic use of resources to achieve the best outcomes for each region, with consultation at the regional level subject to statutory and non-statutory good practice measures, such as those issued by the Better Regulation Task Force and the Cabinet Office.

The Women and Equality Unit has outlined a number of potential regional activities that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights might choose to undertake in the future. These include:

- Developing productive relationships with Business Links, Chambers of Commerce and Regional Development Agencies to influence Small to Medium Enterprises and promote compliance and good practice in this sector.
- Developing strategic relationships with the Learning and Skills Councils, Local Strategic Partnerships, ACAS regional offices etc to promote awareness and understanding.
- Fostering networks of voluntary, community and statutory organisations to raise awareness and promote compliance and good practice on equality and human rights.
- Supporting local organisations to deliver equality and human rights projects, including those it will inherit from the Commission for Racial Equality focusing on race equality.

According to the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Team, the general feedback emerging from its regional stakeholder events can be summarised as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/cehr/devolved.htm>

- Don't reinvent the wheel.
- Commission for Equality and Human Rights has to understand what is going on in the regions and must respect this and be willing to work alongside others.
- The big issue is engagement with the voluntary and community sector at a regional level.

It is as yet too soon to be able to give any definitive overall picture of what regional Commission for Equality and Human Rights presence will look like on the ground because of the widely differential states of preparedness that exist from region to region. In addition, it is also likely that these arrangements will be evolutionary as the Chair, Commissioners and Chief Executive of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights influence events in the future.

### ***Nations***

Commission for Equality and Human Rights offices will be established in both Scotland and Wales to help maintain close working relationships with the devolved Governments and intermediary organisations delivering services locally, to provide a channel for dialogue with stakeholders, and to provide support to the Scotland Committee and Wales Committee. In addition, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Board will have one commissioner with special knowledge of Scotland and one with special knowledge of Wales. These appointments will be made with the agreement of the Scottish Executive Ministers and the Welsh Assembly Ministers.

There will also be provision in the legislation to set up a Scotland committee and a Wales committee (chaired by the designated commissioners) to set priorities for and oversee the work of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights in the two countries.

#### **4.1.2 Nation-Specific Issues**

A number of nation-specific issues have also been identified. Firstly, Scotland:

##### ***Scotland***

Much is still to be decided on how the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will operate in Scotland although the basic structure of a Scotland Commissioner and a Scotland Committee have been laid down in statute, as has the principle of a Scotland office in Glasgow, and a regional presence across Scotland. The Scotland Commissioner will chair the Scotland Committee, which must be established before the Commission for Equality and Human Rights assumes its duties. Each committee member will be appointed for 2-5 years. Where the Commission for Equality and Human Rights plans to take an action which might affect people in Scotland, it must consult the Scotland Committee.

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights' remit for human rights however is limited in Scotland to reserved issues only. The Scottish Commission for Human Rights, the bill for which has recently passed through the Scottish Parliament, will deal with devolved human rights issues. It is anticipated that the Scottish Commission for Human Rights and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will work closely together, their respective roles complementing each other. The expectation is that the Scottish Commission for Human Rights will take a clear lead in promoting human rights in devolved policy areas in Scotland - such as education, health, local



government, transport and criminal justice - while the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will act in non-devolved areas.

Scotland also has an existing equalities network, the Equalities Co-ordinating Group. The Equalities Coordinating Group meets once a month to discuss equality issues in Scotland with a focus on enhancing legislation and good practice, and lobbying Ministers, Members of Scottish Parliament and Members of UK Parliament. The Equalities Coordinating Group has identified the following areas for consideration by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights:

- Employment levels and discrimination
- Improving qualifications and skills issues
- Tackling public attitudes
- Moving from equal treatment to substantive equality
- Taking mainstreaming forward
- Recognising the links between deprivation and inequality
- Building a culture of participation and high expectation

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights may need to consider how best to work with this and other relevant bodies in Scotland, such as the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

### ***Wales***

Section 120 of the Government of Wales Act requires the Welsh National Assembly to promote equality in all its functions and responsibilities. Jane Hutt AM, the Minister responsible for equality, is very supportive of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and has taken time to attend a number of the stakeholder and policy seminars the Transition Team has been co-ordinating in Wales. One of the key challenges facing the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is that Wales has been characterised as an “advice desert”. There is, for example, only one law centre operating in Wales compared to 51 in England. This issue has come up time and again at Commission for Equality and Human Rights stakeholder meetings and it is clear that the Commission’s service delivery and organisational structure in Wales will need to take particular account of this wider environment.

Regional differences between the north and south of the country are also especially relevant. The sometimes geographically and socially isolated rural communities of North Wales - often those whose needs are greatest - are a particular concern. In addition, everything the Commission does in Wales must also be accessible in the Welsh language. The Wales Equality Reference Group (the principle Welsh Equality Network) has been considering the future Welsh presence of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. Effective working relationships will need to be established with this and other stakeholders like the Children’s Commissioner for Wales, the Welsh Language Board (Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg) and the proposed Older People’s Commissioner for Wales.

#### **4.1.3 Summary and Relevance to this Project**

It is evident that a wide range of stakeholders will be involved in determining not just the nature of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights’ future national and regional presence, but also the precise engagement and consultative practices and relationships it adopts with local institutions, intermediaries and networks. The Commission for Equality and Human Rights will be operating in an extremely

complex and challenging environment with the potential for huge amounts of time and effort to be soaked up by process and structural issues.

In addition, not all regions are at the same level of development regarding the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. While the primary aim of this project is to understand the ways in which religious and non-religious minorities will be enabled to engage with and inform the work of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, the likely diversity of future regional and national structures will necessarily have an impact on this.

This reinforced our approach of focusing discussions amongst four groups of stakeholders - regional administrative bodies; equalities networks; inter-faith networks; and non-religious groups/individuals and religious minorities - rather than restricting research to the views of one or other specific stakeholder group.

For example, while in many regions equalities networks are likely to be at the forefront of Commission for Equality and Human Rights regional presence, in others areas it is likely that other stakeholders such as Government Offices will play a key role.

Given the diversity and differential arrangements that are likely to exist in how a local Commission for Equality and Human Rights presence is expressed, we felt it important to consider the various approaches to consultation and participation that key stakeholders are taking and these are covered in the next section.

## **4.2 Approaches to Consultation with Religious and Non-Religious Groups/Individuals**

### **4.2.1 Review of Guidance and Policy**

Before we consider the approaches being taken by particular stakeholders, however, it is worth briefly considering national guidance on this issue.

Firstly, discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief is prohibited in the UK through a number of pieces of legislation. The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 outlaw discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in relation to recruitment and training. The Equality Act 2006 extends those Regulations to cover the provision of goods and services, education, and the exercise of public functions. In addition the Human Rights Act 1998 applies to public authorities and outlaws discrimination on the basis of 'religion, political or other opinion...or other status' and protects 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion' including 'the right to change his religion or belief.'

Although the religion and belief strand in equality is relatively new in Britain, mechanisms to enable engagement with and feedback from organised religious groups have a long-established presence at central, regional and local government levels. These mechanisms exist in addition to those that all people have - such as lobbying Members of Parliament, attending public consultations etc. Historically, however, those with non-religious beliefs - such as secularism or humanism - have not enjoyed a similar level of public influence. Many of course trace the roots of this religious privilege to our historic disinclination to disestablish Church and State.

Recently, though, there has been increased activity to regulate and improve consultation with stakeholders from the religion and belief strand. The Local Government Association in association with the Inner Cities Religious Council from

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the then Office for the Deputy Prime Minister and the Inter-faith Network produced *Faith and Community*, a good practice guide for local authorities which focuses primarily on local authorities' consultation with religious communities. The report's emphasis on building good relationships only with 'faith groups and organisations in their localities' was felt to be exclusive, in that it ignores those with non-religious belief. Some non-religious groups have expressed concern that local authorities are likely to interpret the guidance narrowly and have called for a more inclusive approach, arguing that local authorities need support so that they better understand non-religious groups.

In 2004, the Home Office issued *Working Together*, a report which reviewed patterns of engagement and co-operation between Government and faith communities in England. The report was the culmination of a six-month Government enquiry involving government ministers, advisors and representatives of the nine major faiths. Despite representations from the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society it specifically excluded representatives of non-religious belief organisations. The report outlines clear plans for central, regional and local government to consult faith communities more and with more consistency to understand their needs and concerns. While this report does refer briefly to the need to engage non-religious groups and individuals - largely as a result of extensive lobbying by the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society - *emphasis is placed firmly on improving consultation with faith communities*.

Our research indicates that this continues to be the case. Although *Working Together* recommended that Government departments should also give non-religious groups opportunities to comment, and that humanists and secularists should be included in the Cohesion and Faith Unit's database, real progress in this direction appears limited. Although some non-religious groups, like the British Humanist Society, the Humanist Society of Scotland and the National Secular Society, are invited to participate in some consultations, our review of the relevant literature continues to reveal a much stronger emphasis on consulting with and building the capacity of 'faith groups'.

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Team recognises that more work needs to be done to strengthen the engagement of non-religious groups and individuals and minority religious groups.

#### **4.2.2 Regional Administrative Bodies**

These agencies - to differing degrees in different regions - are likely to play a role in the future in developing options for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' regional presence (including associated structures and consultation mechanisms). With this in mind we consider the approaches to consultation with religious and non-religious groups of three different types of regional administrative bodies: Government Offices, Regional Assemblies and Regional Development Agencies. It is worth considering each type of agency separately in this section, as the agencies have significantly different remits. That being said, it is worth noting that some of the approaches to engaging with stakeholders from the religion and belief strand are quite similar between agencies and regions.

#### **4.2.3 Government Offices**

Government Offices represent central Government in the English regions. They offer experience and expertise to Whitehall Departments in the development of policy and in the way that policies are best implemented, and are the primary means by which a

wide range of Government policies and programmes are delivered in the English regions. They are also responsible for managing a substantial budget to address a range of issues (such as regeneration, crime and environment, unemployment, rural issues).

### ***Approaches to consulting religious groups***

All of the Government Offices that we spoke to had people working specifically on 'community cohesion and faith' agendas. Similarly, all had experienced lobbying of some kind on particular policy issues from religious groups or inter-faith networks. Government Offices were playing a role in developing or sharing guidance on engagement with religious communities in their region. To develop that engagement, one Government Office was working with a regional interfaith network to explore how 'minority religious' groups could be included in decision-making processes. Another had commissioned a leadership development programme aimed at religious leaders. There were also national programmes of work Government Offices have been asked to contribute to such as 'Preventing Extremism Together' that has required Government Offices to work collaboratively with faith groups.

There have been a number of 'drivers' behind the work to improve engagement with faith communities. Firstly, faith groups are seen as part of general consultation that needs to happen with the voluntary and community sector on policy issues. Thus some Government Offices work with Local Authorities in their region to build awareness of faith communities (including minority religious groups). Secondly, Government Offices have been asked to understand and in some cases build the capacity of religious groups as potential deliverers of services in the region. For example, Government Office West Midlands has done some work with the help of Neighbourhood Renewal Advisers to map the current contribution made by faith groups to delivering Local Area Agreements.

An emphasis was placed amongst Government Offices on improving the infrastructure of the voluntary and community sector - of which religious groups are a part - to act as both advocates for particular social groups and as public service deliverers in an area. A key target audience for the majority of Government Offices that we spoke to were 'intermediary' organisations like interfaith or multi-faith networks. These were the religious groups that Government Offices had most contact with through consultation and policy-making forums.

Some interviewees relayed some of the concerns they had about strengthening engagement processes with religious groups and developing the capacity of religious groups to deliver public services (through regeneration funding for example). One interviewee had found it difficult to understand *when* religious groups should be consulted on policy issues and *how to make best use* of their contribution to policy decisions. Another expressed concerns that regeneration projects run by religious groups can be exclusive if they cater for residents from that group.

### ***Approaches to consulting non-religious groups and individuals***

Roughly half of the Government Offices that we spoke to were aware of the existence of non-religious groups or individuals (such as humanist groups) in their regions. However, none of them had consulted directly with those representing a non-religious perspective on policy issues. Instead, as one respondent put it, "...influencing the debate comes through intermediary organisations like interfaith networks. Government Office does not as a rule consult directly with non-religious groups. We would consider all views then single out humanist views if they were particularly

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pertinent, but there hasn't been any particular lobbying by non-religious groups." This and other interviews indicated that there was a willingness to consult with those with non-religious views if they were able to access policy making forums. However, at present the non-religious perspective is not represented.

#### **4.2.4 Regional Assemblies**

Regional Assemblies are partnership bodies that are not directly elected. Instead their membership is appointed from amongst elected local authority members and a range of other statutory, voluntary and private sector partners. While the role and remit of Regional Assemblies does differ across England, their core functions include: scrutiny, planning and transport, regional policy development, partnership working and acting as a 'voice for the region'.

##### ***Approaches to consulting religious groups***

The diverse nature of Regional Assemblies across England can make it difficult to categorise the way religious groups might interact with them. However, our research indicated three main ways in which Regional Assemblies consult with religious groups. Firstly, in their role as 'voice of the region', some Regional Assemblies have a religious representative that relays information to the 'religious sector' and advocates on its behalf. Secondly, as developers of regional partnerships, Regional Assemblies have included regional inter-faith networks and other religious groups as partners in Assembly-driven regional structures (such as the Equality and Diversity Partnership in the West Midlands). Thirdly, the views of religious and inter-faith groups have been sought on specific policy consultations such as regional spatial strategies, or scrutiny of regional economic strategies.

Our interviews suggest that the principle point of contact between Regional Assemblies and the 'religious sector' is through larger more established groups (such as inter-faith networks or Church Associations). This carries with it the risk that the views of minority religions (and of differing 'minority' views within major religions) are not being heard in these regional activities. As one Regional Assembly interviewee put it: "We do not prescribe how our Assembly members interact with other people from their sector. It is not the Assembly's job to be telling the religious representative how he should be feeding back to the sector." Another interviewee highlighted the lack of appropriate guidance regarding how Regional Assemblies should ensure inclusive consultation practices: "Regional Assemblies don't have much prescribed by law around representativeness - the rules are blurred around this."

##### ***Approaches to consulting non-religious groups and individuals***

Regional Assemblies that we interviewed were not aware of non-religious groups or individuals in the region that would want to be consulted on regional policy issues. As a result none of them had consulted directly with those representing a non-religious perspective. However, some interviewees did express a willingness to include those with non-religious perspectives in future Regional Assembly consultation if they registered an interest.

#### **4.2.5 Regional Development Agencies**

Regional development Agencies aim to provide effective, properly co-ordinated regional economic development to underpin regeneration and enable English regions to improve their competitiveness. They are responsible for developing a regional

economic strategy, administering regeneration funding and making sure that skills training matches the needs of the labour market.

### *Approaches to consulting religious groups*

All of the interviewees we spoke to were already engaging with religious groups and in the case of religious groups that had previously been excluded were keen to do more in order to rectify this. While one Regional Development Agency referred to the need to address the issue of an “underdeveloped non-Christian faith community” in the region, responsibility for this type of work was seen to lie predominantly with the voluntary and community sector, and especially with infrastructure organisations and networks that could build capacity and advocate on behalf of religious groups. Another Regional Development Agency explained that it engaged primarily with other agencies and organisations and “not with the public *per se*”. Judging from these responses, it seems likely that individuals and smaller minority religious groups would find it difficult to engage with Regional Development Agencies unless they were already actively engaged members of larger intermediary organisations.

That being said it was clear that some Regional Development Agencies are engaging critically with these issues. One, for example, had undertaken research to assess its religion and belief engagement processes and as consequence had developed a revised religion and belief engagement strategy aimed at strengthening them. Another identified the potential for Regional Development Agencies to learn from each other regarding these issues through the already established ‘RDA Equality Leads Group’ (that includes agencies from the English regions, Scottish Enterprise and has plans to include the Welsh Development Agency).

### *Approaches to consulting non-religious groups and individuals*

While the Regional Development Agencies that we spoke to did not generally have an established connection with non-religious groups or individuals and awareness of the existence of non-religious groups or individuals that might seek to influence policy was low, one interviewee did have a more informed perspective. “Non-religious people have been left out, largely because of the use of the word ‘religion’ in the past,” they explained. “We recognise that the Religion and Belief Regulations did not define ‘belief’ strongly enough and that the 2006 Equality Act definition was more inclusive. That has been helpful and it is clear we now have to consider these issues.”

However, this interviewee also recognised that Regional Development Agencies would need help to develop this understanding and improve engagement with non-religious people. “If you look at the statistics, we do not have enough about non-religious people. Regional Development Agencies need help... Often when you mention religion and belief people go straight for faith groups. In London, over 15% did not indicate they had a religion. If we are doing work, and don’t consider that group, we run the risk of alienating people from that perspective. There is not much awareness of this group.” In terms of raising awareness amongst Regional Development Agencies, one interviewee suggested that the RDA Equality Leads Group had the potential to assist in this area by sharing good practice, undertaking peer review and raising the level of inclusiveness and consistency in Regional Development Agency engagement with non-religious groups and individuals.

#### 4.2.6 Equalities and Human Rights Networks

We are referring here particularly to networks working at a regional level to promote equality in all six equality strands. They are at present at very different stages of development. Some have been established recently and have expressed an interest in contributing to the likely Commission for Equality and Human Rights' regional presence; some are still in planning stages; others are more well-established and pre-date preparation for engaging with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (and are now preparing for it). Our research identified only five networks that could be considered currently operational and are planning to play a potential role in that regional presence (subject to decisions from the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights Board). These are Equality North East, West Midlands Equality and Diversity Partnership, Equality South West, Wales Equality Reference Group, Scotland Equalities Coordinating group.

We also identified a number of other significant equalities networks that operate regionally/ nationally and have similar functions to those networks (London Civic Forum, Scottish Forum on Discrimination, Advantage West Midlands, MENTER/Regional Equalities Forum project in East of England). Each was the subject of extensive interviewing/discussion. Other regions such as the East and South East are in the process of setting up Equalities Networks with the support of Government Offices and other partners in those regions.

The remit and aims of equalities networks differ regionally within England and within Scotland and Wales, but they do share some key characteristics:

- **A facilitative role** - enabling the voluntary and community sector and equalities groups to become more involved in regional decision-making that impacts upon their communities.
- **Information sharing and communication role** - providing guidance, advice and information about equalities issues and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.
- **Networking role** - hosting or creating networks, in particular equality strands to further debate, build links and develop the audience/constituency for equalities issues.
- **Lobbying role** - intervening strategically to influence regional and national agencies to protect and promote equalities and human rights.

#### *Equalities networks and religious groups*

All equalities networks that we spoke to had established a connection with inter-faith and religious groups in their region and some had played a large part in establishing an inter-faith network in their region. Most, however, had formed links with *already established* inter-faith networks.

One of the most direct approaches to engaging with inter-faith groups that equalities networks have adopted is to include an inter-faith network representative as a Board member. This is seen as offering a direct and influential 'voice'. Representatives from minority religions have not generally speaking enjoyed such direct representation, however, with most equalities networks looking to their region's inter-faith network to encourage the inclusion of minority religious groups.

Some equality networks recognise the obstacles to engagement faced by minority religious groups and referred to lack of resources, time, capacity, or a simple disinclination to get involved in influencing policy.

### ***Equalities networks and non-religious groups***

No equalities networks that we spoke to had a direct membership of non-religious groups or individuals and knowledge about non-religious groups or individuals interested in influencing regional policy was, with a few exceptions, fairly minimal. As one participant put it: “I don’t know anything about non-religious groups in the region. [...] I think people are aware that the legislation covers people who represent the non-religious, so I think when discussion takes place, the subject may be mentioned. But generally, the views of the non-religious are not incorporated much or discussed much since there are no representatives from non-religious groups in the strand.”

There was a widespread perception that non-religious individuals are rarely organised and do not want to get involved. One participant explained, “We haven’t had specific involvement with non religious groups. It is not an issue people have raised. Nobody has contacted us. Maybe they haven’t realised what is going on, or maybe there is a lack of interest.”

Another equalities network member stated: “I know there are humanists practising in the region, whether they are well organised I don’t know... We have worked quite closely with the Department for Communities and Local Government, we have done many consultation events and we have invited many people, but I have to say we haven’t concentrated on non-religious groups. We have spoken to people of different religions and faiths, but not yet with non-religious ones.”

Below we outline one approach taken by an Equalities Network in a case study area (South West England) to explain some of the dynamics between equalities networks and non-religious groups and individuals in more detail.

#### **Case study: Equality South West**

Equality South West is aware of non-religious groups in the region. However, they are also aware of some of the barriers to securing their engagement in regional policy-making processes. A key issue to be overcome is a lack of resources and time amongst non-religious groups. “Most of those contacting us don’t have the same organisational capacity as religious groups have. This is obviously a problem and we mostly talk to them on an individual level rather than as organised groups.” Providing more tailor-made engagement opportunities for groups that lack resources, time and capacity is clearly critical.

Equality South West also reflected on the lack of ‘influence’ non-religious groups can have in the religion and belief strand. They pointed to the potential challenges of mainstreaming non-religious issues and getting those views heard in inter-faith forums (which were seen as the most established approach to consulting on the Religion and belief strand). Equality South West believes that equalities networks can play a crucial role in encouraging inter-faith networks to reach out to and interact with non-religious groups.



However, they also recognise that the inter-faith network it has helped to establish is now an independent entity, responsible to its own members for defining its aims and priorities and Equality South West cannot 'enforce' inclusiveness. Nonetheless, Equality South West recognises that "there are many questions about [the inter-faith network's] inclusion, their acceptance, as well as questions about lesbian, gay and bisexual or other faiths [...] being included in the network. There are questions of how to join the network, what are the network's objectives etc. We are told often by humanists that we don't do much about it, that [...] they feel excluded and they don't have a say, but there is not much we can do really, since the inter-faith network is so independent now."

The barriers to engaging non-religious groups and individuals and those from minority religions identified by the five equality networks we interviewed can be summarised as follows:

- Non-religious groups and individuals and religious minorities have not contacted them and therefore do not want to get involved.
- Such groups lack the capacity, time and resources to engage in influencing regional policy.
- Non-religious individuals do not tend to organise themselves in groups, so it is harder to share information with them and to find a common point of reference.
- There are practical difficulties in establishing networks or forums that include both the religious and non-religious: "[...] If people of no faith were simply included in a faith or inter-faith group, they wouldn't necessarily have their voices heard or influence any decisions."
- Inter-faith networks are independent and inclusiveness cannot be 'enforced'.
- Equalities networks need to prioritise whom they speak to because of the large diversity of stakeholders in the religion and belief strand: "Maybe they [the non-religious] have been overlooked, but this is too strong a word. I think that we have tried to be inclusive, there are so many groups it is impossible to contact everyone."

We would also draw attention to the following considerations:

- A number of equalities networks referred to their broad role as helping the *voluntary and community sector* to get involved in regional decision-making. Given the increase of faith-based voluntary and community sector initiatives and funding streams it is important that equality networks assist in ensuring that non-religious and minority religious groups enjoy equal access to decision-making processes and available resources.
- A number of equalities networks have made assumptions about non-religious groups or individuals and religious minorities that may not match what those people feel on the ground (such as their unwillingness to get involved). Often

already existing equality groups have joined regional equality networks because they have been directly asked or have had access to relevant information. Yet, less well resourced/ connected groups or individuals in a region (such as non-religious groups) would benefit from a more pro-active approach by equality networks to mapping local groups and encouraging their involvement.

- Few of the equalities networks that we spoke to had sought members with a particular ‘human rights’ remit or expertise. One network outlined their plans to explore how human rights principles might help them to deliver equality practice in their region, but they were also mindful of the difficulties associated with finding people with that kind of expertise. They felt that legal professionals tend to be the principle source of human rights expertise and that they may be hard to access for work within equalities networks. We identified a clear need across equalities networks to develop both human rights expertise and awareness of its potential application in a voluntary and community sector/ public sector context.
- It is likely that in a number of areas of Scotland, England and Wales, equality networks will be playing an active role in building awareness about the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and building the constituency for its activities with groups that previously knew very little about it. Equalities networks can potentially play a pivotal role in publicising information about the broad scope of the religion and belief strand, including non-religious and religious minorities.
- If equalities networks are to become more directly involved in facilitating dialogue between religious and non-religious groups and individuals, then some will require support to undertake this. Particular areas for development include:
  - **Arguments for inclusion of non-religious and religious minorities:** Understanding the full scale of the religion and belief strand in terms of legislative protection and affected groups. Recognising the benefits of hearing non-religious views when discussing particular policy issues. Working with inter-faith networks to encourage inclusion in membership, and interaction in policy debates and work on social issues.
  - **Mediation and facilitation skills:** Recognising that dialogue between the religious and non-religious on some issues can be challenging and that mediation and facilitation skills can encourage more productive outcomes. (This is obviously equally true for dialogue between religious people and between other equalities strands.)
  - **Building an evidence-base for the religion and belief strand:** Recognising that more mapping can be done of non-religious and religious minorities in an area. Also recognising more can be done to understand particular barriers to engagement/ capacity building issues/ the need for tailor-made provision to encourage engagement.

A number of challenges faced by equalities networks relate to some of the practical problems the Government is facing and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is likely to face in promoting and protecting rights within the strand. There is a historic imbalance between religious and non-religious groups in terms of resources,

organisational capacity and opportunities for influence. However, also more generally, voluntary and community organisations (both religious and non-religious) find themselves strained by increasing demands from the Government to play an (often) triple role of service deliverer, advocate and civic engager.

In addition, equalities networks also face the challenge of breaking down established ways of thinking about religion and belief in their regions. While a number of equalities networks recognise the broader scope of the religion and belief strand outlined in the Equality Act Part 2 [2006], many of their stakeholders and partners continue to see religion and belief as being primarily about *organised religious groups*.

Finding ways to break down narrow ways of thinking about this strand will be key to the success of equalities networks in the future. And this will require them to examine some potentially uncomfortable issues - including their own purpose and practices. They may, for example, need to re-examine the representational models they have adopted and in some cases question their own inclusiveness. They may also need to modify their 'recruitment' practices, placing a premium, for example, on the ability and willingness of stakeholders to engage in a *progressive* discussion of policy issues rather than simply identifying faith or community 'leaders'. Certainly only the fullest and most informed debate is likely to give due weight to the religion and belief strand in its broadest scope. There is a growing acknowledgement of these issues amongst equalities networks. As one participant put it: "Basically we need to figure out why some networks are established, who they are for."

In the next section, we consider the characteristics of inter-faith networks and their approaches to consultation and engagement. This is of particular significance given what equalities networks and regional administrative bodies have said about the role of inter-faith networks as important 'intermediaries'.

#### 4.2.7 Inter-Faith Networks

In a similar way to equalities networks, there is a huge diversity in the size, remit and activities of inter-faith networks between the English regions and between England, Scotland and Wales. Bearing this in mind, it is possible to identify some shared characteristics:

- They facilitate communication and understanding between different religious groups.
- They encourage the exchange of religious views on social issues.
- They support religious groups, build their capacity and enable them to interact and communicate with communities.
- They provide a clear point of religious group contact for regional governance bodies and act as an advocate for their issues.
- They build the profile of religious issues in regional/national public policy making.

Particular consultation and engagement activities that inter-faith networks undertake include:

- Taking part in regional and national steering groups on particular policy issues.
- Responding to policy consultation, government papers and legislation.
- Attending meetings, conferences and consultation events organised by regional administrative bodies or equality networks.
- As members of equality networks.

It is clear, however, from our discussions with inter-faith networks that they differ significantly in three key areas: in their *desire to engage* in influencing public policy; in their *levels of engagement*; and in their *capacity and expertise* to engage on policy-related issues. However, the majority of inter-faith networks we spoke to explicitly aimed to raise the profile of religious views in their area in relation to public policy.

### ***Inter-faith networks' perceptions about the impact of consultation and engagement***

Two of the inter-faith networks that we spoke to were particularly confident that they had an influence on public policy - that their 'voice' was being heard. Others were cautiously optimistic about their influence, but many felt that they had not made much of an impact on public policy at all. This group identified two key obstacles: (a) their own capacity and resources, and (b) the difficulties associated with knowing when influence has been achieved.

One participant said: "Our forum unfortunately has no funding, the people are thus only involved in their spare time. It is different from most other inter-faith networks, because unlike them it was formed by local inter-faith organisations. We would love to have an effect on regional policy but it is very difficult because of the lack of funding." Another said: "We are struggling at the moment. We aren't a very strong organisation but hopefully we will get stronger in the future. We haven't yet managed to influence regional policy because we are not well set up to do so."

While several groups we spoke to recognise that influencing public policy is a long-term process, they also have an additional difficulty in knowing how to assess whether or not their intervention has produced results: "It is very difficult to assess the impact we have in influencing decisions - you never know how much what we say is accepted," said one.

However, overall the majority of inter-faith networks referred to a growing recognition of the role of faith groups in influencing public policy. This was welcomed by all inter-faith networks, although not all were in a position to actively engage at a regional level.

### ***Inter-faith networks' consultation/engagement with religious minorities***

The majority of inter-faith networks that we spoke to expressed a desire to be more inclusive and to encourage membership of more minority religious groups. A number of inter-faith networks already include some minority religious groups - such as Quakers, Jains, Buddhists, Bahá'is, Parsis and Pagans - yet there was a general recognition that more could be included as individual members, and in discussions. Having said that, only one inter-faith network went as far as to say they were *not* representative enough of regional faith communities, describing their membership as "principally White Anglo Saxon Protestants".

The reasons cited for a lack of engagement with minority religious groups related primarily to lack of resource and time to establish links with those communities. While some inter-faith networks pointed out that they had not been contacted by religious minority groups and that in any case they may not want to participate in inter-faith networks, others recognised that they themselves have a role to play in helping to build the capacity and expertise of minority religious groups. But some expressed reservations about minority religious groups being able to work together with those from 'mainstream' religions. The example cited was Christians and Pagans. Indeed only three of the twelve networks we consulted included Pagans in their membership.

### ***Inter-faith networks' consultation/engagement with non-religious groups and individuals***

#### ***Membership***

No inter-faith network that we spoke to had non-religious groups amongst its membership. This approach is consistent with the Inter-faith Network for the UK's approach. Two networks said they would be willing to include non-religious groups in their membership in the future. The majority, however, felt their networks precluded non-religious membership for the following reasons:

- **Non-religious belief does not constitute a 'faith'**: consequently there is no place for 'non-religion' in an inter-faith context. One participant said, "Under no circumstances would we include non-religious, secular groups within our group because we are a faith group. I personally have a fairly relaxed view, but technically we are a faith group and that means including people of faith."
- **Potential disagreements between religious and non-religious groups/individuals**: One participant said: it would be like "...including people who don't like motorcycles in a motorcyclists club. This is not possible and if the people who don't like motorcycles feel excluded, then yes they are." Some others also felt that the inclusion of non-religious groups and individuals would be counter-productive as by and large non-religious people do not want to see religious groups influencing public policy.
- **Resistance to the conflation of 'religion' and 'belief'**: One participant in particular felt that having non-religious members would indicate a conflation of religion and belief, and that non-religious and religious members do not have enough in common to merit that 'conflation'.
- **Limited capacity**: One participant pointed to the need to prioritise issues and support. In a situation of limited capacity priority has to be given to the membership of religious groups.
- **Non-religious groups do not want to join**: And this it is suggested is indicated by the fact that the vast majority of networks have not been approached by potential non-religious members.

A clear message from our research is that most inter-faith networks do not have non-religious members. This is perhaps understandable given the broad remit inter-faith networks have of promoting 'faith issues' at a regional level. Yet the value of this research lies in being able to explore what *motivates* inter-faith network membership and later in this report we shall discuss these issues in more detail in Section 5.

### *Consultation and Debate*

Opinions were mixed on the issue of consultation and debate between non-religious groups and individuals and inter-faith networks. Many inter-faith networks indicated that they were willing to engage with non-religious groups at conferences and other events and that non-religious groups were welcome to attend inter-faith network events. However, emphasis was placed on this being “speaker-audience engagement rather than one-to-one engagement.”

A minority of inter-faith networks rejected dialogue with non-religious groups and individuals outright. One participant said: “Lesbians and homophobes - can you put the two together to talk? It is the same with faith and non-faith groups. Non-religious groups are not our concern.”

According to most inter-faith networks, by far the largest area where consultation and debate with non-religious groups and individuals *could* potentially take place in the future lies in issues of common concern such as housing or the environment. Yet several participants were also quick to underline where the boundaries between faith groups and non-religious groups and individuals lay: “There are common things between faith and non-faith groups, there are always commonalities with all areas of work. We are both interested in issues of equality or social work, but despite the commonalities there is nothing in common in terms of faith. There are commonalities outside of faith.” Few participants were able to offer any examples of collaborative work or projects with non-religious groups on social issues other than common attendance at conferences and debates.

One interesting issue that we encountered as part of our research was a common misinterpretation of the term ‘non-religious groups/individuals’. Some participants simply saw *all* ‘non-faith’ groups - including disability groups, gay, lesbian and bisexual group, women’s groups - as ‘non-religious’. This suggests that in the specific context of the religion and belief strand, the Government and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will have considerable work to do in raising awareness and understanding of these more subtle distinctions.

### ***Challenges to progressing consultation in the religion and belief strand***

Our interviews with Regional Administrative Bodies and Equality Networks have indicated that inter-faith networks tend to be the principle intermediary organisations in the regions for consulting religious groups. Reliance on inter-faith networks as the only representative structure of the entire religion and belief strand has had a detrimental effect on regions’ abilities to consult with non-religious groups and individuals and build up an appropriate evidence base of their concerns and needs. Thus far consultation outside of inter-faith intermediary mechanisms with non-religious groups and individuals has been intermittent and relatively sparse.

This is not to say that the ‘answer’ to improving consultation and engagement between non-religious groups/individuals and regional decision-making bodies should be the increased membership of the former in inter-faith networks. Inter-faith networks have played an important role in their own right with their current membership profiles and it is not the job of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights to ‘direct’ the membership policies of existing regional structures. Instead emphasis will need to be placed on how the Commission for Equality and Human Rights can work with equality networks and inter-faith networks to (a) foster a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the religion and belief strand and (b) consider

how best the consultative mechanisms associated with it at the regional level can be rendered more inclusive.

Seeing inter-faith networks as *the only* intermediaries or advocates for the religion and belief strand as a whole is intrinsically problematic. While it would theoretically be possible to develop regional structures that represent only 'belief' groups - as indeed some inter-faith networks suggested - this would clearly go against the whole grain of the religion and belief strand as outlined in legislation. Given that it is also evident that such approaches have not in the past served non-religious groups adequately, **the religion and belief strand will probably require something more integrated and sustainable at a regional level. It will be in the interest of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights to help ensure that kind of approach emerges.**

Addressing this dilemma will require regional agencies (such as equality networks) to work with inter-faith networks to explore and address some of these challenges to developing an integrated religion and belief strand of work. In our analysis of participants' views we noted some particular perspectives at a regional level that will need to be addressed as part of this process:

- **Conversation and debate between the religious and non-religious in policy-making forums will be too problematic to merit further investigation:** As one participant put it, "Our view is that generally the humanists resent that faith issues are reintroduced in public discourse." Another said, "I haven't yet noticed any aggressive secularism, but I don't want that to become a self-fulfilling prophecy."
- **A lack of 'alternative' or neutral spaces** outside of inter-faith network organised events where inter-faith networks and non-religious groups can come together to discuss social issues and public policy.
- **Differential awareness of the religion and belief strand:** A number of inter-faith networks referred to (and indeed respected) the development of a new 'belief' strand (but not a religion and belief strand). A particular challenge exists in explaining the intellectual coherence of religion and belief as an integrated strand<sup>8</sup>. This challenge is further compounded by inter-faith networks and non-religious groups and individuals having so little experience of coming together to discuss and act upon social issues.

A number of inter-faith networks cited the potential for future consultation with non-religious groups and individuals on issues 'outside of faith'. They pointed to collaboration on less 'contentious' issues of common concern, such as the environment or fair trade. Yet the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and Equalities Networks *will* face the challenge of mediating conversations on more 'contentious' issues and indeed these could be potentially *productive in developing public policy and addressing inequalities*. For example, debate about 'faith schools', or conflicts between the rights of those from excluded groups.

Encouraging debate that critiques and challenges particular long-held beliefs will be critical to increasing the quality of cross-equality strand work in the future. For example, the views of non-religious and particular religious groups and individuals may be used to challenge discriminatory views held by representatives from other

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<sup>8</sup> For more information see Bartlett, M., *Religion and belief: The conceptual Framework Amended*, CEHR Transition Team, 2006.

religious or non-religious groups (on issues in the sexual orientation or gender strands for example).

As the Commission for Equality and Human Rights develops approaches to equalities that mainstream human rights, it will increasingly need to challenge long-established 'taboo' areas of discussion. This will be crucial to understanding the ways that the rights of religious and non-religious groups and individuals might conflict with each other and with the rights of others in society. Using human rights thinking, principles of proportionality and human rights case law will offer insights into how to resolve societal conflicts and dilemmas on these subjects.

The Commission for Equality and Human Rights will also need to encourage stakeholders to critically reflect upon the nature of their identification as 'religious' or 'non-religious'. Traditionally, in much of British equalities policy, primacy has been accorded to protecting and in some cases reinforcing bounded identities of those in particular social groups. Stakeholders in the religion and belief strand will need to consider whether the act of debating and challenging particular long-held beliefs is tantamount to challenging people's identity (and indeed their right to express their religion or belief). In some cases the Commission for Equality and Human Rights may need to encourage those stakeholders to see themselves primarily as 'human beings' interconnected to others in society, and secondly as people with religious or non-religious views and identities. **This reinforces our view that one of the potential values of the religion and belief strand lies in an ability to hold both religious and non-religious views up to common scrutiny, examination and analysis. The networks at the grassroots that might make such an exchange and discourse possible are currently a long way from being able to do so.**

One group that works in this way is the national Religion and Belief Consultative Group that was founded as a reference group for the two religion and belief representatives on the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Steering Group. It has extended its remit and now discusses a range of equality and related issues of interest to the religion and belief organisations, for example the Equalities Review and Discrimination Law Review. This is the only national working group that we are aware of that includes representatives from those with both religious and non-religious beliefs. In section 5.2.1 we examine the potential application of this model at a regional level.

#### 4.2.8 Non-Religious Groups and Individuals

Here we are referring specifically to those groups and individuals that advocate or represent non-religious beliefs or perspectives. Of all the stakeholder groups that we spoke to, this was the hardest to both identify and make contact with and we have already rehearsed some of the reasons for this.

Those with non-religious beliefs are relatively 'unorganised' compared to organised religious groups, for example, and while non-religious people may choose to intervene in regional policy making either as 'private' individuals or professionally as part of their job, they do not necessarily do this as members or representatives of an acknowledged *non-religious group*. Nor do they necessarily regard their 'non-religiousness' as a defining or determining aspect of their identity.

With this in mind, our findings reflect the views of two 'types' of non-religious stakeholders: first, humanist groups in England, Scotland and Wales (given that many local non-religious groups have organised themselves as 'humanist groups');

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and second, non-religious groups and individuals that do not define themselves as humanist. Where relevant, we highlight noteworthy differences between those two types of stakeholders. There is some obvious cross-over between the views of both. *It is also worth noting that whilst many of the local groups that we spoke to would describe themselves as 'humanist', interviewees were often affiliated both to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society and some respondents referred to their views as being 'secularist'.*

### ***Nature of local/regional humanist groups***

In England, many local non-religious groups are affiliated to the British Humanist Association and/ or the National Secular Society and are self-funded. The British Humanist Association provides some support and practical help to affiliated groups (such as regular mailings, informing members about local groups, helping to establish new groups). In a similar way the National Secular Society offers support to local groups in some instances. There are also groups that are not affiliated to either of these national groups. In Scotland, the situation is slightly different: there, the Humanist Society of Scotland also supports local groups, but it collects modest subscriptions that are then redistributed to local groups to help them cover running costs. In either case, however, local humanist groups typically have relatively low levels of resources to fund group activity.

Most local and regional humanist groups undertake the following activities:

- Group meetings (with or without guest speakers)
- Letter writing to press and MPs
- Awareness-raising, including talks and presentations for schools on humanism
- Involvement in (or work to get involved in) local education authorities' Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education
- Acting as celebrants for Humanist ceremonies, e.g. weddings, funerals and namings
- Organising and attending charity events
- Undertaking hospital, and sometimes also prison visits

### ***Humanists' participation in consultation/engagement activities***

#### ***Regional***

The majority of humanists and/or humanist groups we spoke to **were not** or **had not** been involved in consultations with equalities networks or regional administrative bodies. A small minority had been part of consultation procedures organised by inter-faith forums. It was evident from our discussions that humanist and other non-religious groups and individuals do **not** consider themselves to have a significant voice in regional consultative or policy-making forums.

When asked to describe the activities they undertake to have a 'voice' humanist organisations referred to the following main areas of activism. It is worth noting that many of these activities, while obviously significant, are outside of current regional decision-making processes being developed by regional equalities networks:

- **Media Work:** Members of East Kent Humanists and Suffolk Humanists have spoken on local radio on a 'Thought for the Day' slot. The Lewisham Humanist

Group and East Kent Humanists have written numerous letters to local newspapers.

- **Standing as local/national political candidates:** A Bromley humanist member stood as Green candidate in her local elections. There are also a number of members of the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society and of local groups that already hold political office.
- **Awareness raising and local events:** North East humanists have held a stall at Northumbria University's freshers fair, Sheffield Humanist Society regularly hold bookstalls at public meetings, and Lewisham Humanist Group distribute literature about the group and about ceremonies available for non-religious people.
- **Campaigning on social/policy issues:** Many groups campaign on education issues. Religious Education is one of the only subjects which is managed locally rather than nationally and many non-religious people feel that Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education are not representative and should include humanist representatives. Indeed some humanist groups - for example, Cornwall, Lewisham, Dorset, East Kent, North Staffordshire, and Hampstead - have worked to become representatives on their local Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education. Other humanist groups continue to campaign for inclusion and membership.

Other humanists campaign on other issues such as health. For example, a Bromley humanist contributed to Bromley Patients' Charter "Respect for Privacy, dignity and religion and cultural belief", and a Dundee humanist has written a paper for the NHS advising them on how to deal with the spiritual needs of non-religious patients.

Non-religious individuals that were not members of local humanist groups referred to undertaking some similar activities (particularly media work, and lobbying on particular social issues). Although our sample was extremely small compared to the diversity and size of the population of non-religious individuals in Britain, a particular area of 'activism' was *challenging discrimination by representatives from particular religious groups* on issues such as sexual orientation. For example, one non-religious individual had sent a letter to his Member of Parliament criticising recent statements by a local religious leader who had been quoted as supporting the death penalty for lesbians and gay men.

Few humanist groups or non-religious individuals referred unprompted to engagement in established or developing regional structures for consultation on the religion and belief strand.

It is important to note that in Scotland many local and regional humanist groups that we spoke to said they would defer policy and lobbying issues to their national body, the Humanist Society of Scotland. Similarly, in some instances local groups in England saw the British Humanist Association as being the lobbying vehicle that they would look to.

### *National*

Whilst the focus of this project has been primarily regional in England, the national landscape of non-religious engagement is also important to consider as ultimately

this will have an impact on the way the religion and belief strand develops nationally and regionally. Equally, in Scotland and Wales, many debates about the future development of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will play out at a national level. Here we outline briefly the nature of national engagement by non-religious groups and individuals. We cover Scotland in more detail as a 'case study' area and as a nation which has a number of specific characteristics of interest to this project.

England:

The two principle organised non-religious bodies in England are the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. There are other, smaller groups - such as the Brights and the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association - but by and large the two national bodies are the only ones consistently organised and offering support at national regional and local levels. The principle activities of the main national bodies include:

- Campaign work on particular issues
- Submissions to the Government and European Union institutions responding to policy consultations and legislation
- Giving evidence to official enquiries
- Work to build the evidence-base regarding non-religious individuals in England (e.g. challenging 2001 census statistics)
- Helping humanists and other non-religious people to gain confidence in their beliefs at a local and regional level and supporting local groups.

British Humanist Association and National Secular Society representatives sit on a number of policy working groups and steering groups. For example, the Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association sits on the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Steering Group as one of the two representatives from the religion and belief Strand, and on the reference group for the Equalities and Discrimination Law Reviews. She and a member of the National Secular Society also sit on a national 'Religion and Belief Consultative Group' with other stakeholders from the religion and belief strand. This group acts as a reference group for the two religion and belief representatives on the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Steering Group. There is a cross-bench Parliamentary Humanist Group currently consisting of about 60 members, and a number of politicians are members or associates/distinguished supporters of the National Secular Society and British Humanist Association.

Generally, in England, the British Humanist Association feels that more could be done to improve the voice and representation of non-religious views in national policy making. Many members of the National Secular Society would call for a reduction or modification of the influence of religion on policy-making - a position largely shared by the British Humanist Association, except that in those areas where the British Humanist Association recognises the validity of a religious perspective being heard it also advocates for the right of non-religious people to have the same access to decision-making processes as religious groups. That being said, the National Secular Society, for pragmatic reasons would also advocate greater access for those with a non-religious perspective (in the absence of a 'religion free' public policy debate). Beyond this it is difficult to identify definitive standpoints that would apply to all National Secular Society and British Humanist Association members and in any case a significant number of non-religious people are members of both groups.

## Case Study: Scotland

The main organised non-religious body in Scotland is the Humanist Society of Scotland, although the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society also have some members in Scotland. The Humanist Society of Scotland formed in the 1970s when a number of independent non-religious groups joined together. Since the late-1990s it has directly elected its officers.

In recent years Scotland has seen a rise in public awareness of humanist activities and of the non-religious perspective more generally, with membership of the Humanist Society of Scotland doubling. This may be attributable in part to a number of successes the non-religious 'movement' has had in securing legislative changes through the Scottish Parliament - the legalisation in 2005 of Humanist marriages in Scotland, for example. In the last Scottish census, 28% of people indicated that they were not religious (compared to 18% in England and Wales<sup>9</sup>). The damaging effects of sectarianism in Scotland may also have helped increase the audience for non-religious perspectives, according to some interviewees.

Other areas of public policy influenced by the Humanist Society of Scotland include Education Committees at a local level (non-religious groups and individuals have influenced SACREs in England in a similar way). One Humanist Society of Scotland member had been working as a member of the NHS quality improvement committee of Scotland to improve the way the NHS deals with the spiritual needs of non-religious patients. The Humanist Society of Scotland has also collaborated with religious groups like the Church of Scotland on several policy issues (such as reference to homosexuality in schools). Interestingly, this kind of collaboration has tended to be with specific religious groups rather than inter-faith groups.

The Humanist Society of Scotland has a number of links with decision-making processes in Scotland. Its Vice Convenor is an external officer for the Scottish Civic Forum and a member of the Forum on Discrimination. One MSP also belongs to the organisation. But non-religious groups and individuals still face a number of challenges in influencing public policy in Scotland, however. Time and resources are a key issue: the Humanist Society of Scotland has no paid staff, for instance, and this can make it difficult to find the time to intervene on particular policy issues. Another issue for the organisation is the age profile of its membership: although 47% of 25-34 year olds in Scotland are non-religious as compared to only 15% of the over-75s, membership overwhelmingly reflects this older demographic.

The Humanist Society of Scotland is not a member of the Equality Co-ordinating Group, the main equalities network in Scotland, nor are non-religious views represented within that network by its principal representative on issues of 'religion and belief', the Scottish Inter-faith Council, which has no non-religious members. The Humanist Society of Scotland has already indicated that when a committee is formed in Scotland to progress the Commission for Equality and Human Rights work it will seek to secure a seat on that committee in order to articulate a non-religious perspective.

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<sup>9</sup> One reason for this difference has been attributed to the language used in census questions. In Scotland respondents were asked to indicate what religion they grew up with, and what they are now (which in many cases may have changed). In England and Wales there was just one box to indicate religion or belief. In both cases the question asked 'what religion are you' rather than 'do you have a religion', which many believe inflated the figures for the religions, and reduced the number for non-religious beliefs.

Wales:

There are a number of local and regional humanist groups in Wales, many of which are members of the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society. Interviews with those groups revealed similar barriers to involvement in regional and national policy making experienced by those in England and Scotland (such as lack of time, resources and awareness of the non-religious perspective in Wales).

In a similar way to other equality networks in England and Scotland, the Welsh Equality Reference Group has not specifically approached a non-religious group to ensure their involvement. Instead, they have coordinated the views of groups already in existence and who are already expressing views on issues. The Welsh Equality Reference Group is not aware of non-religious groups doing this in Wales, so they have not been included.

In addition, some respondents referred to a strong Christian lobby in Wales which has made it harder for non-religious people and minority religions to get their voice heard in policy decisions. "The problem has been engaging with non-religious bodies and groups. The reason for this I think is that there is no point of contact for these groups/individuals and this makes engagement difficult for us. This may have something to do with the cultural and historical background of Wales".

### ***Non-religious groups' perceptions of the barriers to engagement***

Non-religious groups and individuals referred to similar barriers both at a regional and national level to effective engagement in consultation and influencing public policy. On the ground, non-religious groups have far more in common with the vast majority of 'non-professionalised' grassroots community organisations and experience many of the same pressures due to low volunteer numbers, lack of time and resources, limited capacity and limited (sometimes non-existent) access to facilities, equipment and meeting places. The main obstacles are summarised below, indicating whether they are regional or nation-specific factors:

- **Lack of time:** Constraints on the time of individual members. All of the participants we interviewed were unpaid staff and the majority were busy with other work and lobby group commitments.
- **Lack of resources:** Most local and regional groups are small in number and do not have the resources to dedicate to lobbying activity. All groups are self-funded by subscriptions or donations. Many groups identified a lack of premises for meetings and resources to organise campaigns as significant barriers.
- **Demographic characteristics:** Some groups pointed to the lack of youth involvement (and in some cases a larger proportion of older members) as a reason for the relatively weak humanist voice at a regional level.
- **Rural Issues:** Groups in rural areas are often thinly spread over a large territory, which makes meeting and communicating difficult (mid-Wales, for example).
- **Strength of Religious lobby:** Some groups pointed to the strength of religious lobbying groups in particular areas (the North-west of England, for example) and a concomitant inability to get non-religious views heard. Some groups

suggested that they feel “blocked” by religious groups from being part of policy decision-making groups.

- **Lack of willingness to get involved:** Not all non-religious individuals are interested in ‘activism’ or in influencing public policy. Although it is worth noting that a recent ‘call for volunteers’ to get involved if opportunities arise, publicised by the British Humanist Association, National Secular Society and Humanist Society of Scotland, brought some 200 people out that are able and willing to get involved in regional policy development and engagement.
- **Individual campaigning:** Not all non-religious individuals join non-religious groups to campaign or make their voice heard. Non-religious campaigning can be disparate and hard to map when carried out by individuals not affiliated to particular groups.
- **‘Morality code’:** Some felt that they often have to counter an overriding assumption that those without religion have a less moral or less ethical perspective on social issues. Some suggested that this assumption about the inherently more ‘moral’ nature of religious views is also reflected in local government and regional consultative and policy-making processes.
- **Constraints of national guidance:** Some non-religious people suggested that where local authorities and regional agencies are sympathetic to the non-religious viewpoint, they were constrained by national guidance and legislation (which participants felt ‘privileged’ the views of religious communities over non-religious).
- **Up to non-religious groups to progress:** Some local humanist groups saw their overall ‘invisibility’ as being their ‘own fault’. They felt that it was up to them to build individual groups in order to have more influence locally.

### ***Key Challenges for developing the religion and belief strand***

**Resources:** The principle challenge faced by most non-religious groups and individuals to engaging in policy consultation is probably lack of resources, lack of physical infrastructure and lack staff time. Without a specific building in which to organise campaigning activities and without paid staff, it can be very difficult to intervene in some of the strategic decision-making forums that currently exist at a regional level. There are, however, examples of better-resourced, more established and higher profile non-religious groups. In Norway, for instance, non-religious ceremonies are held in town halls for young people when they reach voting age and the Norwegian Humanist Association is funded by the State.

**Institutional presence:** Another key challenge will be securing an ‘institutional presence’ in any future consultative and policy-making forums established to support the religion and belief strand and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. For example, the Humanist Society of Scotland will be applying to become a member of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Standing Committee for Scotland. Non-religious groups and individuals have made a number of in-roads at a national level in England. However, there still exist a number of examples of ‘religious privilege’ in decision-making processes. There have been some advances in establishing a non-religious presence in some local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education, but the non-religious presence in regional decision-making processes remains negligible.

**Developing a unified voice:** A number of non-religious groups and individuals talked about the challenges of 'representing' a unified voice for non-religious people. For example, the Humanist Society of Scotland is keen to present itself as an advocate for non-religious *perspectives*, but not as the 'representative' body for non-religious people. Many local humanist group members also recognise the diversity of opinion that exists on issues within local groups. This awareness of and respect for others' opinions is potentially an extremely valuable asset and could help non-religious advocates that do participate in decision-making forums offer more nuanced and rounded opinions on policy matters. This is significant when we consider the shortcomings of traditional forms of religious representation and the potential these have to elevate views and opinions that are not necessarily representative of all people within a religion (or community). Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the diversity of opinion within non-religious groups, combined with the absence of a centralised creed or 'manifesto', can make it more difficult for such groups to reach consensual, democratically agreed positions on policy issues.

**Political culture:** Awareness of people that wish to advocate on behalf of non-religious views is not firmly established at a regional level in England and Wales but is arguably more established in Scotland. Non-religious groups and individuals face an up-hill struggle in raising the profile of non-religious lobbying as the importance of reflecting the non-religious perspective (as opposed to 'of no faith') has little currency in our political culture at present.

**Ways of thinking about the religion and belief strand:** Exploring the way that both religious and non-religious groups and individuals think about the religion and belief strand will be an important area for intervention in the future. Some non-religious participants were pessimistic about the ability of inter-faith networks and non-religious groups to work together in the future. Indeed, some consider it a primary function of inter-faith networks to present a 'common front' against 'non-believers'.

Many religious and non-religious people would like to see *separate representative structures* for a 'Religion' strand and for a 'Belief' strand. The idea of having an intermediary for co-ordinating these two perspectives was, however, largely seen to be problematical. And yet it can be argued that it is precisely this coming together of the religious and non-religious perspectives in interaction and mutual examination that would represent the real 'added value' of the religion and belief strand of work for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. The Religion and Belief Consultative Group has demonstrated that this approach can work - and deliver significant benefits - but it has also illustrated the degree to which success depends on getting the right mix of people, group dynamics and attitudes. It is arguable that neither the structures nor the prevailing culture exist at present to make such approaches widely applicable.

**Communication and mediating disagreement:** Key to facilitating more effective interaction between religious and non-religious groups will be improved communication and a much greater capacity for mediation and negotiation. As part of this project we undertook some participant observation at a humanist conference that discussed the question, 'Religion: A threat to personal freedom?' Christian, Muslim and non-religious speakers interacted with largely non-religious audience members to debate the issue. But the passionate, polemical and often confrontational tone of some audience participants made reasoned and civil discussion extremely difficult. At a local micro-level this tends to illustrate the challenges still to come. Both religious and non-religious groups and individuals will need to consider and agree appropriate rules of engagement if these complex and sometimes emotive issues are to be aired and challenged constructively.

## 5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

### 5.1 An Overview of Key Issues

The extensive research involved in this project has focused on four groups of stakeholders: regional administrative bodies; equality and human rights networks; inter-faith networks; and non-religious groups and individuals. Our findings indicate a number of barriers and challenges that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights is likely to encounter in developing inclusive approaches to the regional engagement of these constituencies, both with particular reference to the religion and belief strand but also perhaps more broadly too.

Before we move on to examine these challenges in detail let us first try and summarise the overall position.

#### *Regional bodies*

In terms of the preparedness of regional administrative bodies with regard to the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, there are wide disparities between England, Scotland and Wales, with Scotland and Wales presenting some particular nation-specific issues. While the likely lines of communication and responsibility in Scotland appear to be well developed, with the Equalities Co-ordinating Group poised to take a central role, in Wales by comparison there appears to be much yet to do to resolve these issues.

Government Offices for the Regions are uniformly already working on 'faith and cohesion' agendas and in some cases are aware of the need to expand the representation of minority religious groups, but only around half are aware of non-religious groups and none have sought to consult these groups directly. In addition, there is significant confusion regarding which precise policy issues legitimately require consultation with religious groups and which do not.

Regional Assemblies lack clear guidance on inclusive representational and consultative models and none have consulted directly with non-religious groups.

Regional Development Agencies are currently engaging with religious groups and in the case of previously excluded or under-represented religious groups are keen to do more. While one Agency spoke of the need to address the issue of an "under-developed non-Christian faith community" there is little if any awareness of non-religious groups nor how they might be reached. It is evident that minority religious groups and non-religious groups would currently find it difficult to engage with Regional Development Agencies unless already represented within an existing inter-faith network. There is a widespread view that Regional Development Agencies will need assistance if they are to engage directly with non-religious groups, although the 'RDA Equality Leads Group' may offer the potential for sharing expertise, good practice and information on these issues.

In any case, all of these regional bodies tend to share the view that it is the voluntary and community sector's responsibility to 'deliver' religious (and non-religious) engagement and meeting these expectations will be extremely difficult for the voluntary and community sector.



### ***Equalities and human rights networks***

Equalities and human rights networks are at very different stages of development across England, Scotland and Wales. While there is widespread evidence that their existing relationships with inter-faith networks are well-developed, there is little contact with minority religious groups and none with non-religious groups. There is a widespread view amongst equalities and human rights networks that it is the responsibility of inter-faith networks to 'deliver' both greater religious diversity and - where and if appropriate - non-religious representation. Non-religious participation, however, is also seen as inherently problematical because non-religious individuals, with the exception of those who explicitly define themselves as humanists and secularists, are by and large unorganised, they lack the resources and capacity (and in some cases the inclination) to engage in policy issues and in any case offer no immediate mechanisms whereby their views can be sought. There is also an overwhelming view that the religion and belief strand is primarily about organised religious groups.

### ***Inter-faith networks***

There is a huge diversity in the size, remit and activities of inter-faith networks with these massive differences most evident in three key areas: their desire to engage in influencing public policy; their existing levels of engagement with public policy issues; and their capacity and expertise to engage with public policy issues. Some are clearly fragile, with a lack of capacity and resources that must call into question their long-term sustainability.

No existing regional inter-faith networks have non-religious groups or individuals in membership and there are widely divergent views on whether it is practicable (or 'right') for inter-faith networks to include the non-religious. On balance it would have to be said that opinion is against this.

But there are too widely differing views about what constitutes a 'non-religious group'. And given that not all inter-faith networks even accept the central conception of a religion and belief strand - a religion strand, yes, and a belief strand too, but not a strand which presupposes an equivalence between religion and belief - it is also evident that there is still a huge 'educational' task to be done in fostering a more sympathetic and nuanced understanding of this aspect of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' work. While the structural reasons for the merger of commissions and the establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights seem widely appreciated, an intellectual justification for the religion and belief strand is not widely understood - and nor has one been widely promoted. This is something that the incoming Board must seek to address.

### ***Non-religious groups and individuals***

In terms of organised groupings adhering to a 'system' of non-religious belief, only the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society are numerically significant. There are no significant organised groups representing any great numbers of other non-religious positions.

Of the local humanist and secular societies it is only a tiny minority that have had any systematic contact with either equalities and human rights networks or regional administrative bodies.

On the ground, the majority of those non-religious groups that do exist have most in common with the vast bulk of non-professionalised, grassroots community organisations: they share a similar lack of time, capacity and resources, and frequently have an ageing or older membership and relative under-representation of younger age groups.

In addition, many feel they are not operating on a level playing field with organised religious groups:

- They see local government and public sector engagement and consultation as at best favouring religious groups and at worst discriminating against the non-religious.
- They experience enormous difficulties in projecting a unified voice of the kind that policy-makers wish to hear.
- And they feel they are battling against a political culture which attributes a 'moral' weight to religious participation but fails to seek (or actively dismisses) non-religious positions.

## 5.2 Conclusions

Given the sheer range of issues identified we have necessarily had to prioritise and in doing this we have focused on those areas in which clear, practical steps can be identified. We felt this approach would be most useful to the Transition Team and the incoming Board. These areas can be summarised under four main headings:

- a) Developing practical and appropriate engagement mechanisms.
- b) Awareness, understanding and recognition: the 'added value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights.
- c) Identifying and using evidence.
- d) Developing capacity, access and communication.

We shall now consider these in order, focusing on the key issues and challenges under each of these headings.

### 5.2.1 Developing Practical and Appropriate Engagement Mechanisms

The fundamental issue for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights at the regional level will be that of developing inclusive and appropriate engagement models that are fit for purpose. Before this can be done, it is therefore necessary *to clarify that purpose*. For example, is regional engagement essentially an issue of representation or is the objective rather to develop engagement models that can contribute expertise and strategic guidance in keeping with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' proposed core functions of:

- Promoting and encouraging good equalities practice
- Working to eliminate unlawful discrimination
- Monitoring the effectiveness of legislation
- Promoting an understanding of the importance of good relations
- And identifying areas where social and institutional change is necessary and the outcomes which will achieve this change

If the purpose is the latter - and we believe it is - then engagement with stakeholders from the religion and belief strand should reflect this, offering a capability of providing the Commission for Equality and Human Rights with expertise and evidence to

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identify and prevent discrimination against those with religious or non-religious beliefs.

But as our research shows, at present regional approaches to engagement are overwhelmingly concerned with representation and as a consequence are primarily modelled on 'group representation'. They do not seek to assemble specific skills, aptitudes or expertise at the regional level; 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 widely 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 speaking from their own experience represents the views of a wider community; and they tend to emphasise identity over expertise. This ignores the differences that exist within minority groups (whether defined by ethnicity, culture or religion or indeed a mixture of all three), such as nationality, class, gender, cultural and religious interpretations, sexual orientation, age and disability.<sup>10</sup>

And yet there is a common assumption that a broader, more inclusive engagement process will help to develop better equality practice at a regional level. We have seen little evidence to suggest this is true. Indeed, as a potential 'tool' for garnering expertise and evidence to identify and prevent discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, 'group representation' models may well be at odds with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' purposes. Rather than ensuring that individuals are in a position to share evidence of discrimination and advocate innovative solutions to reducing that discrimination - which requires them to think outside their own narrow interests or those of the community they believe they are representing - group representation models may reinforce a tendency for individuals to define themselves by their ethnic, cultural and religious differences, seeing other groups as competitors rather than allies in a common struggle for equality. With each representative fighting for a particular corner, it can be difficult to step back and see the 'bigger picture'.

This suggests to us that a distinction needs to be made between engagement and representation and that one possible way to do this is by placing a much clearer emphasis on what we might call 'strategic guidance'. The starting point in this model is that people's opinions are sought because of their expertise and aptitudes - what they know, what they do, the things they care about or have a legitimate interest in - rather than because they are a particular ethnicity or religion. The purpose of engagement in this instance is consultation rather than representation. In this model, 'advocates' (rather than representatives) for issues of religion or belief might be selected by interview rather than election or self-appointment. Advocates would be invited to contribute regional or local intelligence, views and advice derived from their expertise and knowledge.

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 - we

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<sup>10</sup> See *Who Speaks for Me?*, Tanuka Loha and Kenan Malik in dialogue in *Catalyst*, 20/11/06. <http://www.catalystmagazine.org/Default.aspx?LocID=0hgnew0n7.RefLocID=0hg01b00100k.Lang-EN.htm>

believe that competence in equalities is a learned skill. In the context of stakeholders for the religion and belief strand such 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.
- A good understanding of the role of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and a willingness to learn.
- An ability to identify and analyse evidence of religion or belief discrimination.

If the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' purpose for engaging with stakeholders from the religion and belief strand at a regional level is to understand the nature of discrimination in this area and identify good practice to prevent it, then a strategic guidance model would offer some clear advantages over a group representation model:

- It would help introduce a crucial distinction between the functions of *engagement* and *representation*.
- It would offer a clear rationale for the kinds of skills required - and why they are needed.
- And it may assist in encouraging groups and organisations to pool their expertise and understanding in a spirit of mutuality, rather than competing with each other to secure resources and/or influence using their religion or belief as a 'lever' of entitlement.

A good example of where this type of approach has been adopted is in the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Steering Group and in particular in the roles played by its British Humanist Association member and Muslim Council of Britain member. These individuals are not 'representative' of all religions or beliefs, but have been appointed to feed in their views of the religion and belief strand as a whole to the Commission for Equality and Human Rights Transition Team. In turn they report to the wider Religion and Belief Consultative Group (whose members include those from religious and non-religious perspectives). Although this group is relatively new, it has enjoyed some success in developing a sophisticated level of debate on policy issues of concern to the religion and belief strand and this is largely due to the communication styles, analytical skills and professionalism of its members and Chair. It has also required members to place a level of trust in the two steering group members advocating on behalf of the religion and belief strand.

We see the potential for similar types of Religion and Belief groups to be established at a regional level to inform the work of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. At present inter-faith and/or multi-faith networks tend to be the main mechanisms for regional engagement and some thought would need to be given to the logistics of identifying smaller 'strategic guidance' Religion and Belief groups which, while perhaps drawn from existing networks, are separate to them and working to objectives which have been mutually agreed both by the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and regional stakeholders.

This will not necessarily be easy, but we are convinced that something along these lines will be necessary for three reasons:

- First, to enable a clear distinction to be made between the roles of representation and strategic guidance.

- Second, to enable the establishment of smaller guidance groups for which a clear advocate rather than representative role exists.
- And third, as a means of promoting clearer intellectual justifications for, and explanations of, the Religion and Belief strand and its objectives.

Consideration would also need to be given to individuals' training, capacity-building, support and remuneration.

Clearly, this would require a much more co-ordinated approach to developing appropriate engagement mechanisms at the regional level than has so far been possible during this transitional period. Nonetheless it is evident that a more managed and guided approach is desperately needed.

### **5.2.2 Awareness, Understanding and Recognition: the 'Added Value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights**

Our research also indicates a relative lack of awareness of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and its objectives at a regional level and in particular widespread uncertainty regarding:

- The specific objectives, purpose and rationale of the religion and belief strand.
- What cross-strand working will 'look like'.
- And the use of human rights principles to inform equalities practice.

Many of those challenges relate directly to differences in perspectives and awareness between the four groups of stakeholders we interviewed. Thus an underlying challenge is how best to share information between these stakeholders and develop more co-ordinated approaches to these issues.

While people are aware that equalities strands have merged, and that there will be a regional presence (with some regions already thinking about what those structures might look like), this is a structural rather than an intellectual 'fix' and much remains to be done in terms of justifying, explaining and promoting the cross-strand equalities model and in particular the rationale for the Religion and Belief strand - which, as our research findings show, is actively opposed by significant numbers within existing inter-faith networks. This is a critical challenge given the key role that these existing networks are likely to continue having as Commission for Equality and Human Rights comes to inhabit the regional landscape.

These new models for equalities practice require transformational thinking as well as transformational structures or mechanisms and at present attention is focused on the latter largely to the exclusion of the former. This needs to change.

The establishment of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and the merging of six equalities strands and human rights offers opportunities that have previously been missing in UK equalities practice. But this 'added value' is not yet widely understood or appreciated at the regional level. The added value of a cross-strand approach lies in the potential for dialogue free from some of the 'baggage' associated with past approaches to equality that have emphasised the importance of particular group needs over others.

The way that we think about equality in the UK is driven largely by the laws that have been put in place to prevent discrimination against particular groups (such as ethnic

minorities or women) in particular situations (such as recruitment, promotion at work). Whilst this has helped to protect some people, others have not been able to benefit because they have not met a particular 'profile'. For others, even reducing the discrimination they experience has not been enough to prevent them from suffering inequality. For example, although people are ensured a fair chance at job interviews, other things that have happened in their life (such as a lack of decent education, or a long term illness) continue to limit their ability to benefit from that chance.

It is likely that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will be discussing whether human rights should be a 'seventh strand', or a mainstreamed principle through all six equality strands. We think it makes most sense as a mainstreamed principle. Human rights can be used to broaden the scope of equality, to address systemic inequality, and to fill some of the 'cracks' through which people have fallen in the past. Mainstreamed throughout all equalities strands, human rights have the potential to render equalities more inclusive and less dependent on the 'special pleading' of victimhood. For example, in the past religious minorities have only been able to gain social or political influence (and in many cases resources and access to services) by invoking or proving their minority status. (Currently it might be argued that this is the case too for non-religious groups; certainly, many within those groups take precisely this view.) Things don't need to be this way. Human rights are 'inherent' and all humans are born with them. While religious or non-religious identity is important to many people, it should not have to be invoked in order to enjoy basic rights.

Human rights principles of proportionality, then, can be used to guide some of the most challenging equalities debates, especially where the issue revolves around balancing the rights of individuals and/or groups against the rights of others in society. (This might have been the case during the Behzti<sup>11</sup> affair, for example.)

A cross-strand approach may also help us to understand the degree to which groups actually share particular forms of inequality or oppression. For example, non-religious and religious groups may in fact share some aspects of inequality and could find ways of joining together in common cause. Indeed, groups from different equality strands may join together as they find the causes of their inequality are shared.

Yet finding people willing - and able - to enter into debates like these and creating an enabling environment for such debates will be a huge challenge. It will require groups and individuals to 'let go' of particular interests they may have, including the desire to perpetuate conventional approaches to resolving equalities issues at a national or regional level. More established strands (race, sex, disability) have found this and fear that protection for them (or indeed advantages they may have gained over many years of campaigning) will be diluted or lost. Similarly, including non-religious and/or minority religious perspectives in representational and consultative structures (and in the debates conducted within those forums) may be seen to challenge the 'privileged' position of religious groups. At the moment, the kind of 'letting go' required for cross-strand working and the trust and mutuality which are a prerequisite for its establishment are not even near.

There are very real and significant 'educational' challenges, then, in developing the kind of understanding and awareness that will make such transformational thinking possible. In particular:

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behzti>

- Encouraging established players in the religion and belief strand to 'let go' of their narrow, sectional interests, change their thinking and work outside of the comfort zones which have been built up over many years.
- Bringing people at a regional level to a place where they can 'buy in' and understand cross-strand approaches.
- Creating an enabling environment in which regional administrative bodies and other partners can assist in influencing the equalities practice of regional groups in the six strands.

### 5.2.3 Identifying and Using Evidence

There are particular issues in the religion and belief strand regarding evidence and the use of evidence. Unlike gender, race or disability, the religion and belief strand is relatively new and its purpose and parameters not widely understood. As a consequence, our understanding of discrimination (both levels and kinds) on the grounds of religion and/or belief is not well-developed. There are additional problems too: 'mapping' religious and especially non-religious groups (as rehearsed elsewhere in this report) is problematical; the precise role of religion and belief in self-identity is extremely fluid; and in terms of discrimination, it is widely acknowledged that other factors - class, gender, nationality, cultural practices - may also play a big part in addition to religion and/or belief.

For these reasons, developing an evidence base to support our understanding of discrimination on the grounds of religion and/or belief is of primary importance and as we have already discussed above engagement at the regional level has a potentially important role to play in assisting this. We need, for example, to better understand when religion and belief are not the key factors, and we need to be able to triangulate and compare the views and experiences of a wide range of stakeholders in the religion and belief strand with other forms of evidence. Again, as we have already discussed, representational models founded of 'group representation' (or community or interest group representation) are not best suited to assisting this analysis.

There is a clear challenge, then, both in building the evidence base and in assisting stakeholders to acquire the skills and expertise which will help them identify, contribute and analyse appropriate evidence.

This also points to the need to develop a much clearer rationale to underpin consultation on the grounds of religion or belief. For example:

- When is such consultation required?
- Which policy issues necessitate the consideration of religion and belief perspectives and which do not?
- Can religion and belief stakeholders expect an automatic 'entitlement' to be involved in all of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights' policy development work at a regional level?
- How does a religion or belief perspective add value to discussion of other equality strands?

These are complex questions, but developing better evidence on religious and belief discrimination and sharing this more effectively between equality strands (and stakeholders) should help to identify those areas and issues where religion and belief expertise is both legitimate and required.

#### 5.2.4 Developing Capacity, Access and Communication

We have already suggested that simply ensuring the representation of greater numbers of excluded groups (religious or non-religious) in regional engagement and representative structures will not necessarily guarantee either more progressive equality practices at the regional level, or the greater availability of robust evidence and data. Hence our emphasis on what we have termed strategic guidance approaches rather than 'group representation'.

And yet if approaches based on strategic guidance are to be inclusive and accessible to those with a broad range of perspectives (and from different backgrounds), there is a real need to make sure support is provided both to individuals who might wish to get involved and to minority religious and non-religious groups where - as the research has amply demonstrated - capacity, resources and sometimes the necessary expertise are extremely limited. Many regional stakeholders - especially religious minorities and non-religious groups - will see this as critical to establishing a level playing field which does not favour established, organised religious groups over all others.

And yet, it does appear that a wider range of people do want to get involved. For example, the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association jointly have advertised for non-religious individuals who can "represent the interests of people with non-religious beliefs to government agencies" and in the one-and-a-half months in which the advertisements have been circulating over 200 people have expressed an interest.<sup>12</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that the numbers willing to be involved are significant and this is encouraging. But the costs and logistics of providing training, support, capacity-building and other forms of assistance to enable not just effective engagement but a meaningful contribution amongst these stakeholders will represent a major challenge. This will be as much of an issue for regional administrative bodies - which will need to establish viable terms of reference and codes of conduct for religious and non-religious engagement - as it will for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights and its incoming Board. In particular, the process of developing an enabling environment that makes it possible for groups including religious, minority religious and non-religious perspectives to discuss even the most contentious issues has yet to begin.

As part of this project we conducted two development sessions with regional administrative bodies, stakeholders from the religion and belief strand and equalities networks in the South West and West Midlands. In these sessions, we explored ways of approaching debate about equalities issues using human rights principles to negotiate and debate particular interest group positions. The sessions were quite successful and there is potential to replicate them in other regions as a means of building awareness, developing skills and establishing 'safe spaces' for open and honest debate and discussion.

The biggest challenges, however, remain those of:

- Getting appropriate people around the table.

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/35451bf53493d87662478817.pdf?CPID=82df4fab550f0aea54c9cc7d901>.



- Developing confidence, skills and expertise and building skills where these are lacking.
- And challenging and changing existing practices while also building trust and mutuality.

### 5.3 Ways Forward

A lot of what the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will be doing in the regions is still to be decided, and this makes it difficult to propose concrete recommendations. However, there are clear tasks and activities that do need to be progressed and we discuss these ways forward below. For the most part, these recommendations are linked - i.e. for one to work, the others will need to happen (e.g. new regional structures will only work if a wider understanding of the 'added value' of Commission for Equality and Human Rights is encouraged and promoted and if resources are there to help build skills and capacity).

#### 5.3.1 Developing Practical and Appropriate Engagement Mechanisms

Working in conjunction with statutory and voluntary regional stakeholders, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should:

- a) Develop alternative spaces and/or forums where Religion and Belief stakeholders can come together. While additional to existing inter-faith and equalities and human rights networks, these smaller groups would be complementary 'sub-sets' of both, with their participants reflecting both religious and non-religious perspectives. (If non-religious participation in existing inter-faith networks remains a sticking point then Religion and belief 'sub-groups' could be helpful in offering a 'neutral' space for 'mixed' discussion/input.)
- b) Identify Religion and Belief sub-group participants by interview rather than election or self-appointment. In this way, emphasis could be placed on seeking particular skill-sets, expertise and competence rather than religious, cultural or ethnic 'identity'.
- c) Ensure that any interview processes are accessible (in terms of resources and time) and target a broad range of expertise/skills so those with competence in related areas can still get involved.
- d) Ensure that the purpose of these sub-groups is widely understood and that there is an emphasis on:
  - Building an evidence base regarding religion and belief discrimination;
  - Sharing skills and experience in a spirit of mutuality and shared endeavour;
  - And creating a space where difficult equalities issues can be discussed and resolved.
- e) Work with equalities networks and regional administrative bodies to:
  - Develop a constituency for and trust in the Religion and Belief sub-groups;
  - And encourage inter-faith networks (in particular) to engage with these alternative forums.

### **5.3.2 Awareness, Understanding and Recognition: the 'Added Value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights**

Working through the proposed Religion and Belief sub-groups, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should:

- a) Make concerted efforts to 'market' the 'added value' of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights to stakeholders in the region, and in doing this expand the constituency for these ideas and encourage wider 'buy in'.
- b) Encourage equalities networks and agencies and regional administrative bodies to:
  - Explore the application of human rights principles to equalities work;
  - And explore possibilities for cross-equality strand analysis and action.
- c) Work more proactively with and seek to fund more work by organisations that are already exploring these new ways of working.
- d) Encourage work that thinks more critically, creatively, and innovatively, and which seeks to remove past labels and 'boxes' by moving away from interest group-led equalities to models that emphasise our shared humanity.

### **5.3.3 Identifying and Using Evidence**

Working through the proposed Religion and Belief sub-groups and with other statutory and voluntary regional partners, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should:

- a) Commission work and activities that can assist in building the evidence and knowledge base of religion or belief discrimination and how it interacts with other issues (e.g. race, class, gender).
- b) Assist in 'triangulating' the regional stakeholders' input with fresh evidence and data as a means of developing robust evidence-driven reasons for policy interventions.
- c) Assist the proposed Religion and Belief sub-groups (which can in turn work with other regional partners/stakeholders) to develop clear rationale and guidance for when religion and belief perspectives are legitimate and/or required (e.g. in which policy areas, contexts or initiatives).

### **5.3.4 Developing Capacity, Access and Communication**

There is a clear argument for additional resources and support (training, capacity-building etc) to help build skills at the regional level. However, there is a legitimate discussion to be had regarding whether 'delivery' is the role of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights or a regional voluntary sector role - especially as there seems such a widespread assumption at the regional level that promoting greater diversity in religious (or non-religious) representation is the responsibility of the voluntary sector.

Perhaps, in the absence of some of the specifics about how the Commission for Equality and Human Rights will operate at the regional level, the clearest case that can be made at the moment is that the Commission for Equality and Human Rights should adopt an enabling role, working to secure funding and other resources where necessary so that the work of regional stakeholders can be better supported, with specific regional/local delivery arrangements to be considered in due course.

Work in this area should include:

- a) Equal recognition for funding purposes of religious minority and non-religious groups. (It should also be noted that funding sources for this work should focus solely on enabling such groups to build their capacity and expertise specifically with regard to engaging with regional partners and the Commission for Equality and Human Rights regionally and nationally rather than on requiring them to develop 'spurious' service delivery functions as a means of securing resources.)
- b) Ensuring equality of access to information, to regional decision-making processes and to opportunities to work with the Commission for Equality and Human Rights at a regional level.
- c) Support for the work of the British Humanist Association and National Secular Society in their efforts to build engagement, skills and knowledge of non-religious participants interested in getting involved.
- d) Building skills, knowledge and expertise of non-religious and religious to engage in a non-confrontational way on contentious issues. This might include mediation and conflict resolution techniques or customised 'advocacy' courses to develop a new cohort of regional advocates on religion and belief issues.
- e) Support for regional administrative bodies, equality networks and inter-faith networks to:
  - Establish safe, neutral environments where contentious issues can be discussed;
  - Support (especially for regional administrative bodies) to develop clearer guidance on inclusive engagement and consultation as well as clear rationale for which policy areas require the input of religion and belief perspectives.



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