

GUIDELINES FOR THE FUNDING OF FAITH GROUPS IN SCOTLAND

The important role, potential and actual, played by faith groups in our communities – tackling poverty and social exclusion, regeneration and community cohesion, dealing with some of the most difficult and intractable social issues – deserves recognition. In Scotland churches have been involved in this work for centuries; for minority faiths it is more recent. There is no doubt that the work of faith groups adds enormous value to the lives of innumerable individuals and communities, and Scotland would be a much poorer place in many ways without their activities.

The work of faith groups in our communities has been funded in a variety of ways historically. In earlier times, faith groups themselves have raised the funds necessary for their activities, from within their faith communities. In recent years, they have begun to apply to mainstream funding sources for support for their projects. This has in many cases been successful, and there are numerous projects based in faith groups being funded across Scotland by local authorities and other funders.

However, faith groups' applications for funding are not always successful, and while clearly not all applications to limited sources of funding can be approved, there has been a concern that some projects are being rejected out of hand by funders simply because they come from faith groups.

Refusing an application on these grounds alone is discriminatory and there is an urgent need to correct misunderstandings in this area to ensure that worthwhile projects can be funded, bringing benefit to communities and providing value for money to funders.

There is general agreement that public funding should not be used to support the worship activities of faith groups or the promotion of a particular faith. However, the Scottish Government is quite clear that there can be validity and value in funding services and activities run by faith groups. It has been argued that this is justified only if the services and activities are open to all, regardless of their faith. However, it is the view of the Scottish Government that a service or activity, even if targeted at those within a faith community, can nevertheless be assessed in terms of its public or community benefit and a case for public funding can be made.

An area which funders may find difficult is where proselytising and community activities are closely aligned. In such cases, it may be possible for example to fund a proportion of the total cost of the project – if a project is 20% about faith promotion and 80% about supporting young homeless people, the 80% could be funded.

Questions have also been raised [about](#) whether the presence of a Genuine Occupational Requirement attached to a post or posts within a project would render it ineligible for funding. Again, the project would have to be examined carefully, but if there were aspects of the project or the work to be undertaken by the post/s which were not directly promoting a faith or trying to attract people to join a faith, then they could be considered for funding.

There is an aspect of funding for faith communities which is more problematic – that is the public funding of capacity building or the development of structures within individual faith communities. In this situation, funders need to judge the potential benefits against the possible risks. Support for the strengthening of structures within a faith community could have major benefits in terms of community participation, the co-ordination of community services, civic renewal and the improvement of public services. At the same time, there may be a risk of involving funders in sectional politics within faith communities, so care should be taken to avoid this.

It is not uncommon for funders, including local authorities, to insist on faith groups establishing separate legal entities or semi-independent structures in order to be eligible for funding for service delivery or project activity. Although some faith based organisations may find this helpful, it should not be rigidly imposed, where it may artificially disrupt the integrity of the organisation.

Decisions on whether to fund a particular organisation should be made in terms of the nature of the case the organisation is making, its fit with the criteria of the funding stream and value for money considerations, rather than on whether it has a religious or secular nature.

Given that many faith groups will be small scale and may lack experience in applying for funding, it would be helpful if support could be provided to guide them through the application process. This may be most appropriately provided by other voluntary sector bodies with experience in capacity building, or a local authority may provide such support through their equality officer/s.

Conclusion

With the exception of the promotion of one faith, activities run by faith groups can receive public funding from local and national government. Funding should not be denied solely on the grounds that the applicant is a faith group. Equally, funding cannot be guaranteed to projects from faith groups, they must be considered on their merits as with any other applicants.

Some examples of projects which have been funded:

North Lanarkshire Council currently fund the following Muslim groups: -

- Lanarkshire Mosque (youth activities, women's groups and crèche costs).
- Airdrie & Coatbridge Islamic Centre (community outreach and language).
- Islamic Society of Airdrie & Coatbridge (youth activities and language).
- North Lanarkshire Senior Citizen Asian Group (educational activities following a lunch club).
- North Lanarkshire Muslim Women and Family Alliance (youth activities and crèche costs).
- Monklands Asian Group (Senior Citizens' activities)