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TAUNTON



Faith Groups and Public Service Contracts: SEMINAR SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

The seminar forms part of a national research programme into the engagement of faith groups in bidding for contracts for public services.

The seminar is part of the research undertaken in the south west by *faithnetsouthwest*. The research is part of 'FaithAction', a planned, national 3 year programme to facilitate the development of a national database of faith-based organisations interested and/or experienced in public service delivery.

Commissioned by the Office of the Third Sector, the lead partner is Lifeline and Faithworks is a delivery partner for this work.

PROCESS

faithnetsouthwest sent out over 1000 questionnaires to faith groups in the region, asking if they had considered becoming involved in the tendering process, where they would look for support and what barriers they perceived to their engagement.

Questionnaires were also sent to regional support agencies to identify what help they could offer to faith groups. Commissioning bodies were also asked if they had considered faith groups in their commissioning processes.

The level of response from faith groups was very encouraging. Nearly 1/3 of faith groups responding expressed an interest in getting involved in the process, or in learning more.

The major challenges for faith groups' future involvement with the tendering process are reflected in the major points arising from the seminar included in this summary.

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ISSUES FOR FAITH GROUPS ARISING FROM THE SEMINAR

Getting Involved: Faith groups and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) can be under-represented. They should raise their profile and bring their experience of working within local communities to local government bodies; form Local Monitoring Groups and get involved in the process early.

Know Your Assets: Faith groups and VCS are often unaware of what can be included in a bid as an asset of the bidder. Be aware of expertise within the congregation, volunteers with experience are assets. Faith groups, in particular, have assets in the form of land and buildings which should be included in bids. Use **full cost recovery** when making bids and do not forget to include the costs of volunteers.

Assets include expertise within congregations, land & buildings

Relationships and Partnerships: The importance of building relationships is a key point. Faith groups and voluntary and community organisations can work in partnership to bid for public services. But they need to invest much more time in establishing relationships with each other, and do so well in advance of any bidding process, to ensure that

Getting to know the key people can bring down barriers

their partnerships are strong and offer real advantages. Establishing relationships with commissioning bodies is as important as relationships with potential bidding partners.

Sharing: Sharing expertise, information, good practice and advice by faith groups and other community organisations reduces the amount of reinvention of the wheel taking place. It also means that strong relationships are in place before bidding starts, and they are more likely to survive after the process is over. Faith groups have both longevity and comparatively secure finances to offer in support of the bidding process, making them attractive partners. However, a lack of communication with other community organisations means that these advantages go unacknowledged and underused.

Avoid reinventing the wheel

Getting Guidance: Faith groups should make contact with agencies that can support and inform them on what is involved in bidding for public services. Councils of Voluntary Services, rural community councils and specialist agencies like SAVAGE (Southern Association of Voluntary Action Groups for Europe) can be of considerable assistance. Local authorities, who are also likely to be commissioning bodies, can offer

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support. Use the guidance which is generally available or issued as part of the commissioning process.

There should be more specific resources to enable support agencies to help faith groups and other community organisations through the process of bidding for contracts.

Accessibility and Scale:

Commissioners need to rethink the scale of tendering to reflect the large number of small projects offering services in very specific local areas. Faith groups' involvement requires informed analysis by commissioners, who, when creating their procurement framework, should ask themselves 'who are we talking to?' and 'are they representative of the communities we are trying to support?'

There should be more analysis of the need for faith groups and other community sector bodies, before more core funding sources are abandoned in favour of contracting out services.

*Who are we talking to?
Who do they represent?
Who are we trying to help?*

Complex Forms / Effective Bids:

Application forms are often extremely complicated. Groups need to allocate time and seek out sources of advice. The consultation process itself may need review, given that many faith groups have neither the time,

resources, or informed awareness to give to a complex consultation document, though they may well be able to provide the services the commissioning body is seeking.

Faith groups should use evidence to support their bids based, both on their knowledge of the local community's needs and publically available statistics (eg. *State of the South West 2007*, by the South West Observatory, <http://www.swo.org.uk/SoSW2007/indexSoSW.asp>).

They should also be aware that contracts are negotiable.

Valuing our volunteers

Volunteers: There were two concerns about voluntary working.

1) Many faith groups provide valuable community services through the use of volunteers, but in many cases recruitment is increasingly an issue. The volunteer workforce is aging and households where both partners are working are now so common that fewer people have time to volunteer their services. The benefits system can also discourage volunteers who are on benefits, as they may lose income as a result of their voluntary work in the community. These are not simple issues and will need to be addressed long term.

2) Perception by the statutory sector of volunteers as amateurs is damaging to their bids for funding. It is also misguided given the massive commitment of often well qualified

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or experienced people to a project. Commissioners need better information and analysis of what the voluntary sector can provide.

Prejudice: Faith groups perceive bias against their projects on the blanket assumption that their aims are to convert rather than to help. This attitude is so prevalent that many faith groups are put off even beginning the process of bidding for contracts. Faith groups should work on improving communication with commissioners to dispel the myths.

Equality and Diversity: Many issues arose at the seminar which highlighted this as an area where a dialogue needs to be established, which acknowledges both the legislative requirements for commissioners to ensure that service providers adhere to legislation on equality and diversity, and understands that faith groups reflect the wide range of views that society holds on these issues. Commissioners should look at how faith-based community projects adhere to expectations of equality and diversity in the same way as they would with any other bidding agency.

Jargon: Jargon can be a barrier between commissioners, faith groups and the rest of the Voluntary and Community Sector. It was unanimously

agreed that the way forward will necessitate both jargon-busting by commissioners and a willingness from bidders to learn the language.

Jargon busting & learning the lingo

Many faith groups are put off even beginning the process

FUTURE ACTION

faithnetsouthwest will produce a final report on its research, including the issues arising from the seminar. It will soon be available to those who attended and will also be posted on the *faithnetsouthwest* website. A regional database is being built of organisations that can offer advice to small groups about bidding processes.

More work, it is hoped, will provide specific guidance for faith groups on this subject. Faith groups in the south west region will be kept informed of future work on bidding for contracts.

Other useful publications:
Faith in Action in the South West, 2006. Available in pdf online at www.faithnetsouthwest.org.uk, or in hardcopy from *faithnetsouthwest*, 162 Pennywell Road, Bristol, BS5 0TX.

Daily Service: How Faith Communities Contribute to Neighbourhood Renewal and Regeneration in the South West of England, by Marion Jackson and Richard Kimberlee for GOSW and the South West Council of Faiths, published by UWE, 2004.