



Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

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House of Commons Debate

Covid-19: Faith Groups

col 597 **Stephen Timms (Labour):** ... [the all-party parliamentary group on faith and society] held a series of meetings with faith-based groups contributing to welfare to work, to health and wellbeing and to work with young people—recognising that most youth work in Britain now is undertaken by faith groups—and groups working on international aid. It quickly became clear from those discussions that the groups often had a problem with their local council. Councils suspected that the groups were only really interested in trying to convert people, or that any service they provided would be biased in favour of their own members. ...

As a result, however, communities miss out on really valuable contributions that the groups could be making, so we came up with the idea ... of a faith covenant. The covenant sets out ground rules for co-operation between faith groups and local councils to make clear what each should expect of the other, to try to build up confidence on both sides and support them to work together. ...

col 598 Over the summer ... the all-party group commissioned the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London to research those council-faith group partnerships. Questionnaires were sent to all 408 UK local authorities and 48% of them filled them in and returned them. Fifty-five in-depth interviews with council leaders and faith-based projects were conducted across 10 local authority areas. Our report, “Keeping the Faith” was published in November ... They found a big increase in the number and the depth of partnerships between local authorities and faith groups. More than two thirds of the councils surveyed reported an increase in partnership working with faith groups and 91% described their experience with faith groups as “very positive” or “positive”. ...

Faith groups and faith-based organisations have been integral to the civil society response to the pandemic, opening up buildings and food banks, running networks, sharing information, befriending, collecting, cooking and delivering food and providing volunteers. ...

col 599 The report recommended that the Government appoint a faiths commissioner, working across government, to help faith groups relate to government and to make the fullest contribution that they can. ... We have proposed a new faiths advisory council,

chaired by the new faiths commissioner and attended by Ministers and senior civil servants to look strategically at how faith groups can best help in post-covid Britain. ...

col 600 Adam Holloway (Conservative): ... our Sikh temple, the gurdwara, has ... delivered 64,000 free shared meals to individuals and to the local hospice and nursing homes. At the peak, it was doing 1,300 meals a day. When the European lorry drivers were trying to get home for Christmas, it did 800, 1,000 and then 1,500 meals a day. So far in this lockdown, the gurdwara has provided over 25,000 meals, and when the local hospital ran out of scrubs for the staff, it got fabric from Malaysia, had it sewn in Leicester and then distributed the scrubs. ...

Jim Shannon (DUP): ... From schemes such as ringing elderly constituents regularly, delivering shopping or prescriptions, or holding distanced meetings, the love shown by those making up so many denominations, Churches and faith groups has been heartwarming. ...

col 601 Christian Wakeford (Conservative): ... The response of all faith groups across my constituency of Bury South to the covid pandemic has been truly humbling. They have selflessly mobilised to ensure that those in need have been cared for, but I want to focus specifically on a group I have been intimately involved with since its inception last year. The Jewish Strategic Group was founded in order to collaborate and co-ordinate the Jewish community's response to the covid-19 pandemic. ...

On a national level, I also pay tribute to the Jewish Leadership Council for the social care assistance fund that has financially supported so many charities not only in my constituency but in the Jewish community across the country. ... In addition, its emergency community fund has helped to support individuals whose earnings have been affected by the pandemic. ...

col 602 The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Eddie Hughes): ... Just before lockdown occurred, I had the opportunity to visit Israel with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) ...

That visit was made thanks to the Conservative Friends of Israel and it was an opportunity to learn more about that country, the Jewish people and so on. I am not at all surprised by the excellent examples that my hon. Friend gave of their work in this country during the pandemic. ...

The pandemic has given us the opportunity to see what good work these groups do, serving people of all faiths and none, regardless of what faith it is. ...

Christian Wakeford: ... The religious communities have not only gone above and beyond; they have helped others while missing their own festivals. ...

Eddie Hughes: ... I, like many people, have never needed my faith more than over the previous 11 months. As a Catholic, one of the things I missed most during the first lockdown was going to church. ... We missed the breathing space we get from praying alone. We missed attending mass as a community. It was particularly hard for all of us over Easter, Passover, Eid, Vaisakhi and many other festivals, and it is with a heavy heart that I realise things still will not be the same this year. However, it is certainly right that places of worship are now open for regular communal worship. ...

col 603 Throughout this exceptionally challenging time, faith groups have played a vital role in providing leadership for many and in bringing communities and generations together. ...

During the pandemic, churches, mosques, gurdwaras and temples have opened their doors wide to provide essential support for the most vulnerable people in their communities, and not just those of faith. This year we have seen with our own eyes how faith groups have an ability to mobilise resources that some other civil society actors simply do not. ...

To turn to the APPG's report, the statistics are impressive. While council capacity for

engagement has reduced during the pandemic due to building closures and furloughed staff, 67% of local authorities have reported an increase in partnership working with faith groups since the start of the pandemic. ... I noticed the striking statistic that 91% of local authorities described their experience of partnerships with faith groups as very positive or positive. ...

col 604 We have achieved a great deal in the past year under incredibly difficult circumstances. I am in full agreement, as is the Faith Minister, that we should capitalise on these positive outcomes. We do not want to lose all this good work and the momentum that has been created. It is a great shame that potentially the lack of understanding of what could be collectively achieved has held some councils back from working with faith groups. ...

At this time, when our NHS is rolling out the country's biggest ever public health programmes, faith groups are again at the forefront of that effort. It is the diligence and care that allowed communal worship to restart last year that now allows places of worship to transform into places where large-scale vaccination can take place for the benefit of all of us. ...

Faith is a vital part of our identities and it motivates us to play a key part in our communities. ...

To read the full transcript see

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-02-11/debates/A0C1914E-7B70-4309-9E9E-AE1FBD11C76F/Covid-19FaithGroups>

The report referred to above can be read at

https://www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG_CovidReport_Full_V4.pdf

Charity Commission

Official Warning issued to trustees over 49 undocumented loans agreed on behalf of Manchester charity

... The Bersam Trust has objects to raise funds for charitable causes including the support of the Orthodox Jewish religion and education. The charity also leases a building to a faith school and funds some of its support costs. ...

The inquiry has found the trustees, who will receive the warning, oversaw borrowing of £1.9 million, via 49 separate loans, not documented within loan agreements. ...

Many were only agreed orally and whilst there is no evidence money was lost by the charity in this way, the Commission says the trustees exposed the charity to significant and unnecessary risk by their actions.

The Commission also found the charity was administrated in a way that failed to reflect that the school and charity were separate organisations, with one loan secured on the basis that the school achieved a satisfactory Ofsted rating, a matter the charity had no control over and which could have led to significant financial loss to the charity were the school to perform poorly. ...

Amy Spiller, Head of Investigations at the Charity Commission, said: Good governance is not a bureaucratic detail, it's essential in ensuring a charity delivers on its charitable purpose and isn't exposed to unnecessary risk.

The trustees of The Bersam Trust failed to ensure this and instead, through their lack of financial management and basic governance, agreed a significant number of undocumented loans that risked their charity's future. Our inquiry has exposed these failures and it's right the trustees have been issued with an Official Warning requiring them to act to protect their charity. We expect the trustees to comply with these actions." ...

To read the full press release see

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/official-warning-issued-to-trustees-over-49-undocumented-loans-agreed-on-behalf-of-manchester-charity>

Decision: Charity Inquiry: The Bersam Trust

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charity-inquiry-the-bersam-trust/charity-inquiry-the-bersam-trust>

Official warning of the Charity Commission for England and Wales to Joshua Waldman, Abraham Vogiel and Jehudah Waldman being charity trustees of the Bersam Trust

<https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/SCHEMES/491393.PDF>

Scottish Parliament Written Answer

Weddings and Funerals: Covid-19

Jeremy Balfour (Conservative) [S5W-34945] To ask the Scottish Government for what reason 20 guests are permitted at a funeral during the current lockdown, but not at a wedding.

Ash Denham: From 8 January 2021 the Health Protection (Coronavirus) (Restrictions and Requirements) (Local Levels) (Scotland) Regulations 2020 were amended to limit the number of people permitted to attend a marriage ceremony in a protection level 4 area to 5 people. This is the minimum number required under the law for a marriage to be solemnised and is made up of the couple getting married, the two witnesses and the local authority registrar or the religious or belief celebrant. If an interpreter is needed, they can attend in addition.

This change was one of a number of additional actions the Scottish Ministers considered necessary to minimise further spread of the virus. These decisions reflect the public health advice.

While up to 20 people are still able to attend funeral services, with effect from 8 January, wakes must not take place in a protection level 4 area.

Funeral services are an essential part of the bereavement process and vital to people's wellbeing. They cannot be delayed. Our decision on marriage ceremonies reflects that the right to marry is an important one, but also that a wedding can be postponed if a couple want a wedding with more people attending. The current restrictions give couples who want to get married now the chance to do that, whilst minimising the risks of transmission at the marriage ceremonies that do proceed.

<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S5W-34945>

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Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2622>

Assisted Dying Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2592>

Domestic Abuse Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2709>

Education (Assemblies) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2579>

Freedom of Speech (Universities) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2820>

Genocide Determination Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2621>

Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2608>

Marriage (Approved Organisations) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2537>

Marriage (Authorised Belief Organisations) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2795>

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2584>

Scottish Parliament

Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Bill

<https://beta.parliament.scot/bills/domestic-abuse-protection-scotland-bill>

Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill

<https://beta.parliament.scot/bills/hate-crime-and-public-order-scotland-bill>

Post-mortem Examinations (Defence Time Limit) (Scotland) Bill

<https://beta.parliament.scot/bills/post-mortem-examinations-defence-time-limit-scotland-bill>

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Consultations

** new or updated today

**** closes in 7 days**

Introduction of a statutory opt-out system for organ donation for Northern Ireland
(closing date 19 February 2021)

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/organ-donation>

Human Rights Act Review (closing date 3 March 2021)

<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/93/human-rights-joint-committee/news/138635/call-for-evidence-the-governments-independent-human-rights-act-review/>

Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19
(closing date not stated)

<https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk/take-the-survey/>

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