

Survey Report



Introduction

The survey questions were sent to 418 people. The list was made up of over 170 equality contacts at local authorities in England and Wales and all the delegates and speakers at the 4 BHA 'religion or belief' conferences held in 2008 and 2009. 106 answers were received which is a 25.5% response rate.

The questions were designed to discover the amount of knowledge that people have regarding the 'religion or belief' equalities field and what support they felt was needed to take such work forward.

The full questions to the survey can be found in annex A.

About the Equality and Human Rights Project

The survey forms part of a project run by the BHA and funded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission which aims to increase understanding of issues of 'religion or belief.' The work is based around the equality and human rights field with regard to 'religion or belief' including legal and policy issues.

The full project consisted of a 'State of the Nation' report investigating the current issues in the field, four conferences for equality and human rights practitioners, a media letter writing campaign to increase understanding of equality law and the production of a 'Toolkit' including a guidance document on 'religion or belief' and good practice.

About the British Humanist Association

Our Vision

A world without religious privilege or discrimination, where people are free to live good lives on the basis of reason, experience and shared human values.

Our Mission

The British Humanist Association exists to promote Humanism and support and represent people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.

Links within the equality and diversity sector

We have representation on the Equality and Diversity Forum, 'AFAN' (The All Faiths and None Project), the Religion and Belief Consultative Group, the Council of Ex Muslims, the Sex Education Forum, the National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, the QCA's Religious Education Consultants Panel, HEAR, the Accord Coalition and the Anti Academies Alliance among others. We are former members of the Steering Group for the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the reference group for the Equalities and Discrimination Law Reviews. We are also members of the NCVO, Volunteering England and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary

Organisations as well as being recognised stakeholders with NICE, the Human Genetics Commission and the Office of National Statistics Diversity Advisory Group.

We also have more informal links with the Interfaith Network of the UK, TUC, ATL, NUT, ASCL, UNISON, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the UK, Sikh Education Council, Hindu Council of the UK, Council of Christians and Jews and the Three Faiths Forum, and we are members of the European Humanist Federation and the International Humanist and Ethical Union.

Membership and supporters

We have nearly 10000 members nationally and over 2000 supporters (interested parties who do not have full membership status.) Among these we have over 100 distinguished supporters including members of the House of Lords, members of Parliament and academics in the field of 'religion or belief'.

Specialist knowledge and experience

The BHA is the national charity representing humanists and the non-religious. We work at all levels to strengthen the equality mandate within the 'religion or belief' field. At government level we currently take part in departmental consultations. We have also submitted evidence to the Joint Committee of Human Rights on adults with learning difficulties. To exemplify this relationship, Parmjit Dhanda, Minister for Community Cohesion Department for Communities and Local Government, described the BHA as "a key stakeholder"¹ in the 'religion or belief' equality strand.

In addition we have attended meetings with Jim Knight, (Minister of State for Schools and Learning,) Parmjit Dhanda, (Minister for Community Cohesion Department for Communities and Local Government) and Sadiq Khan MP (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) on a range of 'religion or belief' issues. We also support the All Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, which has over 100 members and supporters.

Our report *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations* was launched in November 2007. This is the only report currently studying the effects of contracting out public services to religious organisations and has been well received.

The BHA has been representing humanists and non-religious people since 1896 and has been campaigning in its present form since the 1960's. It is the largest humanist organisation working in this field and is considered an expert in the field of 'religion or belief' and equalities by the government, voluntary sector, media and others.

Local Links

The BHA has over 100 organisations affiliated to it. This includes over 70 local humanist groups as well as student groups and special interest groups. In addition to this we have over 150

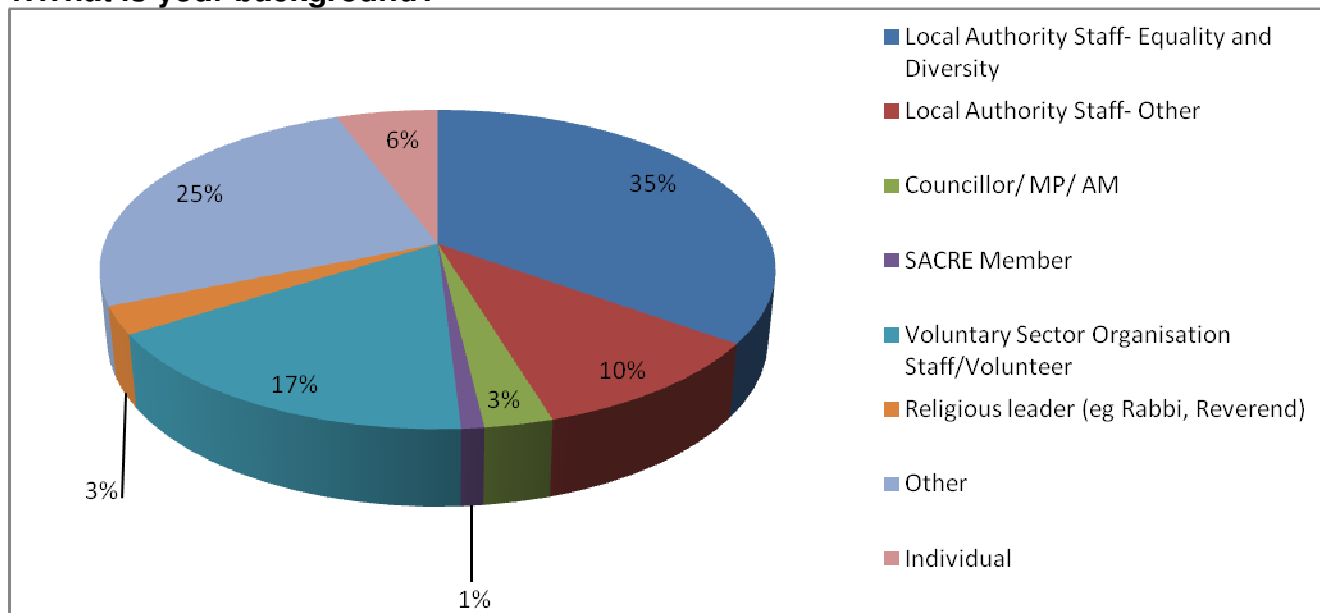
¹ Parmjit Dhanda, Runnymede Conference on Community Cohesion in Schools, Monday 26th November 2007, The Barbican Conference Centre, Silk Street, London EC2Y 8DS

individual volunteers who are working with their local authorities to increase representation and inclusion opportunities for non-religious people. A number of these volunteers are also working with 'interfaith' organisations to make them more inclusive.

Our Celebrants network works within local communities to provide non-religious funerals, weddings, civil ceremonies and baby namings. This gives support and direct service provision at grassroots level.

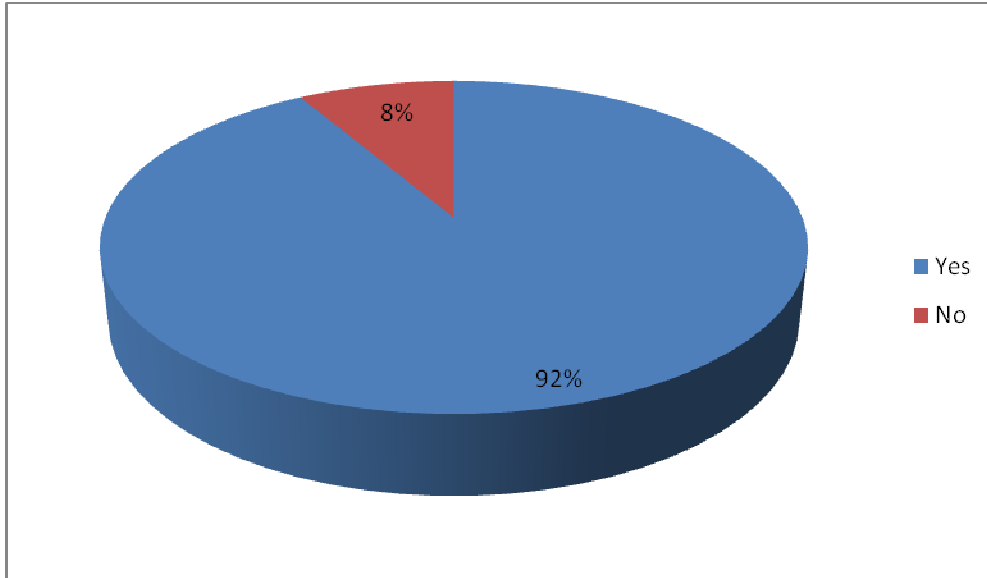
Survey Results

1. What is your background?



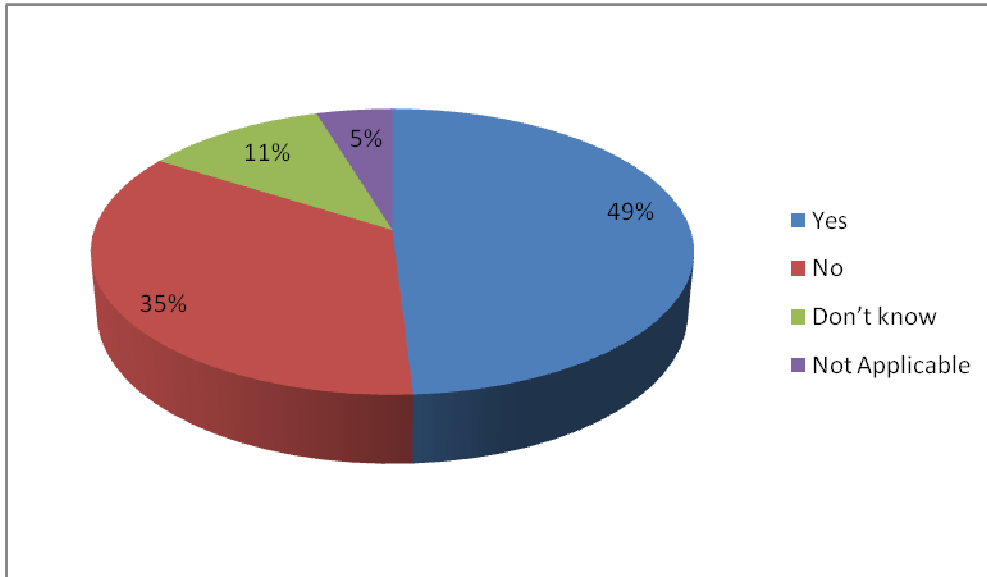
The largest proportion of those who answered the survey were local authority staff working in the equality and diversity field. There was also a high number of other local authority staff and a high number of people from the voluntary and community sector. The data that follows therefore, is from a good sample of those who may be interested in future work in the 'religion or belief' equality field.

2. Did you know that the 'religion or belief' equality strand covered those with non-religious beliefs and those with no 'religion or belief?'



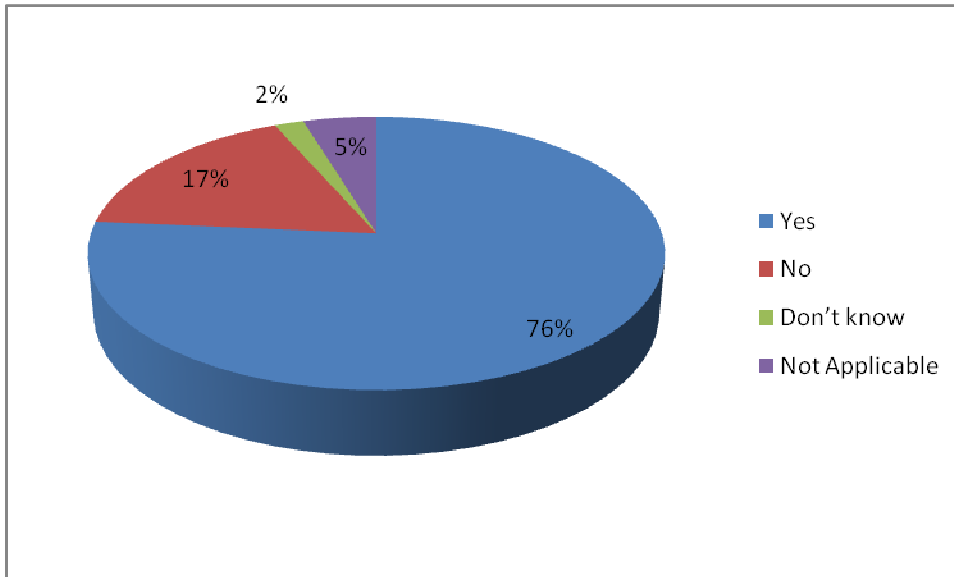
Positively, the majority of people understood that the equality strand covered people with non-religious beliefs and no 'religion or belief.' This shows a good understanding of the theory of the strand and the meaning of the term.

3. Do you feel that your organisation engages with non-religious people on an equal level as religious people? (eg the way you involve them in community cohesion work etc)



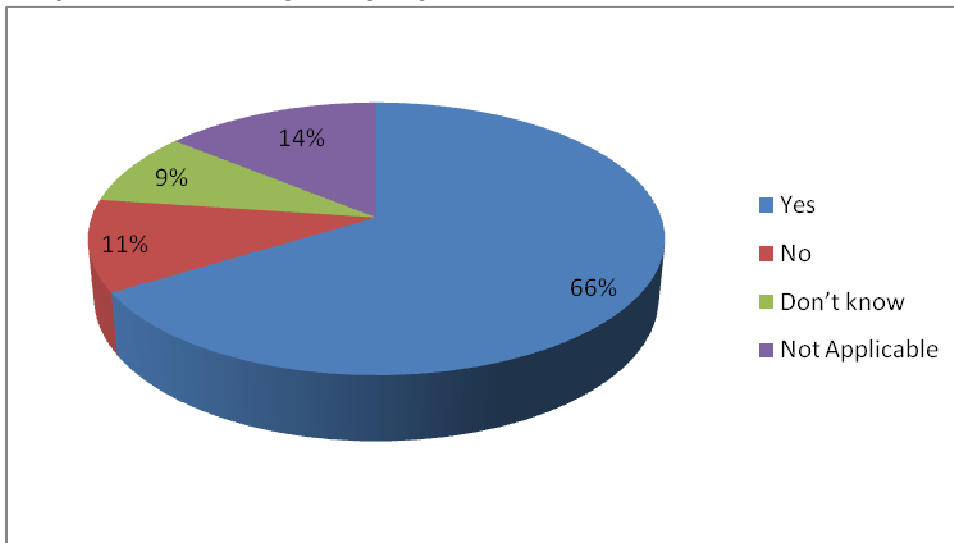
Also positively, 49% of people felt that this understanding carried over into the work of their organisation, which engaged with those of religious and non-religious beliefs on an equal basis. However, 35% did not feel that there was equality within their work on this basis. This is a clear indication that, although people are aware of the full breadth of the equality strand, this does not always translate into equal engagement in practice.

4. Are you involved with work to increase understanding between people of different 'religions or beliefs'?



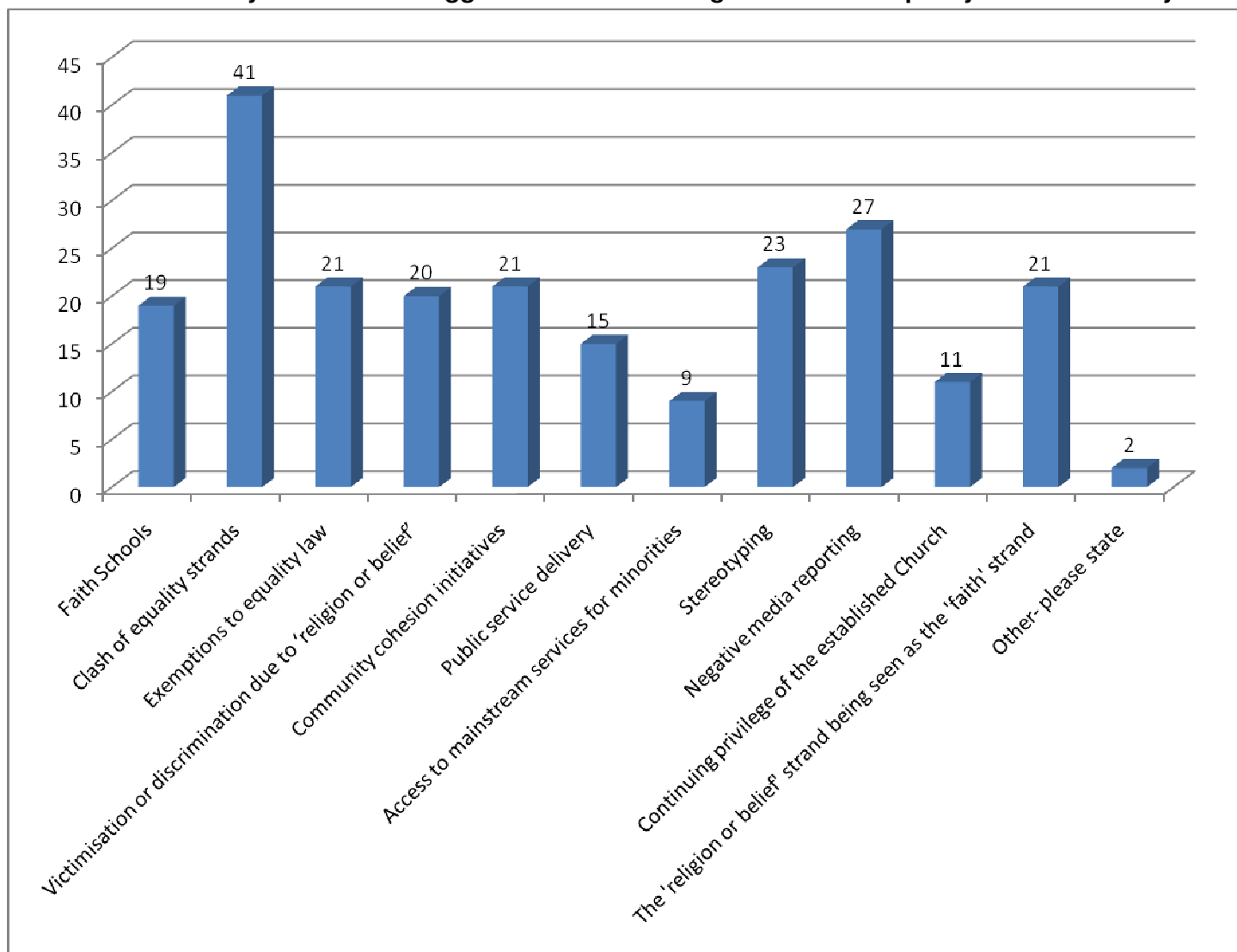
76% of people are involved in work to increase understanding between people of different 'religions or beliefs.' This suggests that this work is likely to be taking place in the majority of local authorities, or that it is at least likely to be on their agenda in some form.

5. If yes, are non-religious people involved in this work?



The answers to this question suggest that the majority of work which aims to increase understanding between people of different 'religions or beliefs' does include non-religious people. However, it is unclear how they are involved and what the level of involvement is. If taken with question three, this suggests that, in some cases, people with non-religious beliefs are involved, but perhaps not on an equal level to those with religious beliefs.

6. What do you feel is the biggest issue in the 'religion or belief' equality strand currently?



Examples of other issues stated were:

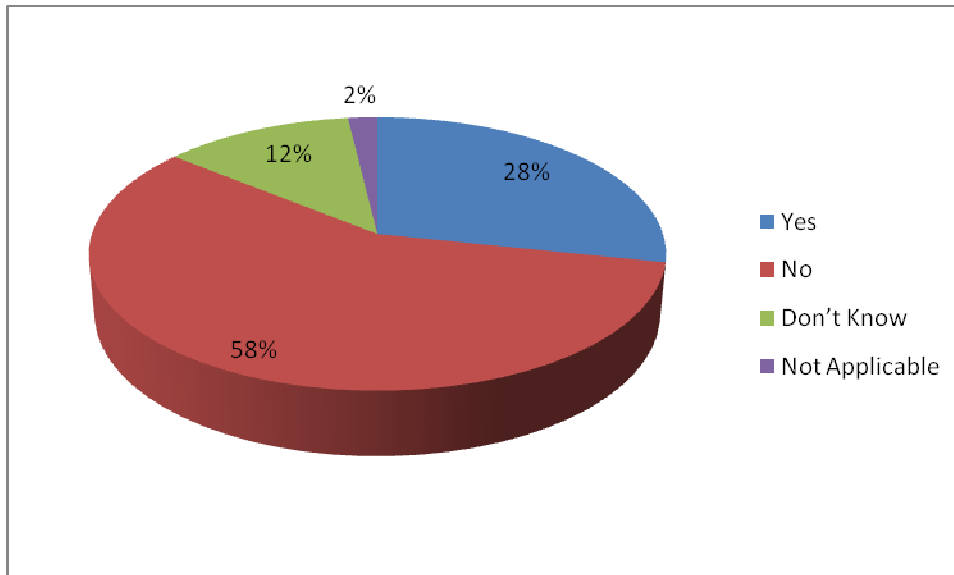
- In particular, as the law relates to trans people
- Particularly in relation to disability issues and the social model of disability
- I think clash of religion/belief strand with sexual orientation is the biggest issue but a lot of the above are important
- Lack of understanding that non-religious 'belief' is essentially different from religious belief
- The lack of religious or non-religious agencies/bodies working at strategic level in the Greater Manchester sub-region
- Militant secularism that is as intolerant and irrational as religious intolerance

The subject seen as most important in this respect is the clash of equality strands, eg the 'clash' between the 'religion or belief' strand and the 'sexual orientation' strand. The second most

important areas surround media reporting and stereotyping. The labelling of the strand as the 'faith' strand was seen as having equal importance as community cohesion initiatives and exemptions to equality law and slightly more importance than actual discrimination.

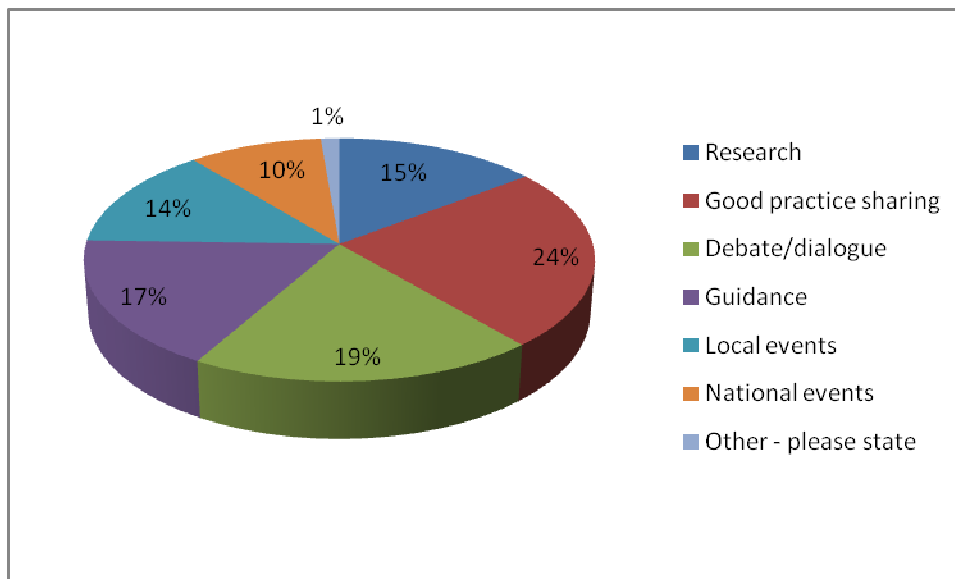
The least important issues were seen as access to services and the privilege of the established Church.

7 Do you feel that you have enough guidance/ information to tackle such issues?



Significantly, 58% of people said that they did not have enough information to tackle these issues and only 28% felt that they did. This suggests that more work needs to be done to fully equip those working in the field with the necessary guidance and information.

8 What information would be useful?

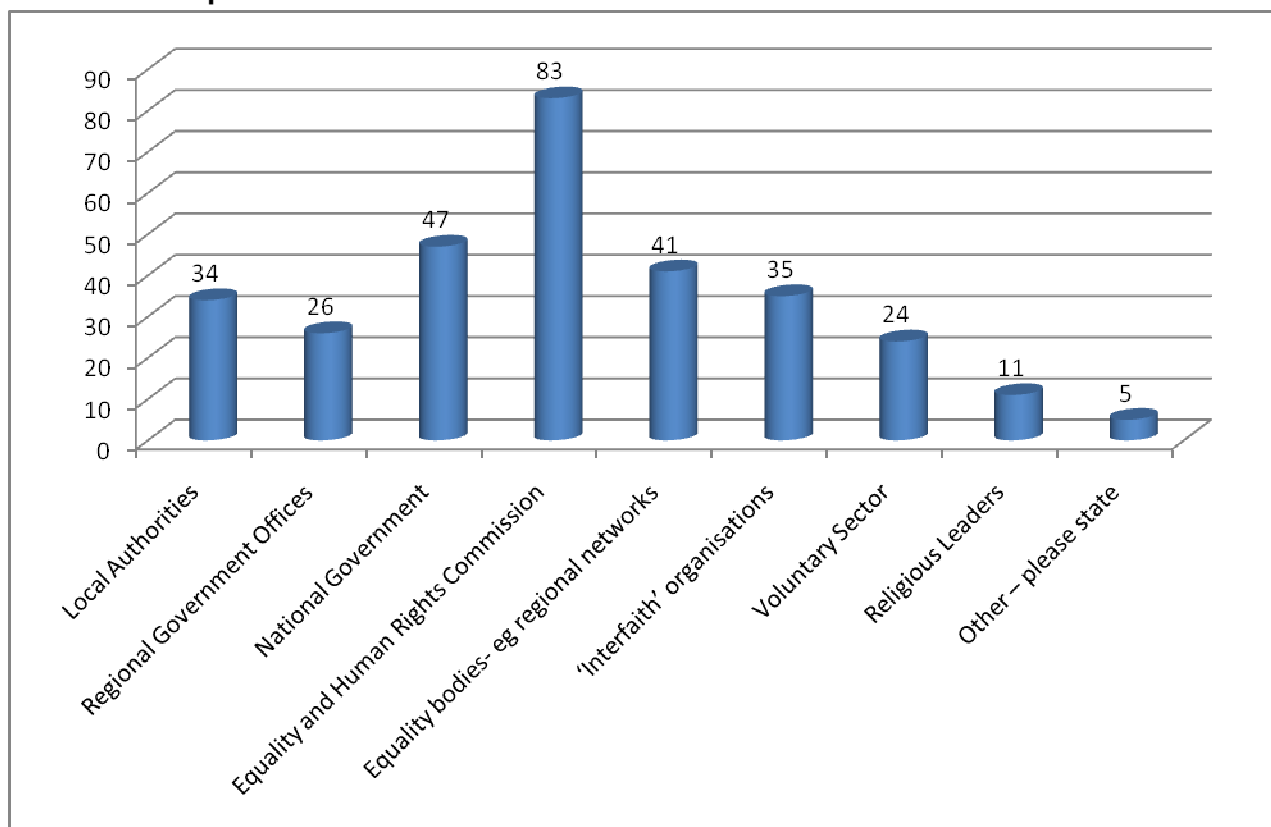


Examples of other needs stated were:

- Sensitivity and awareness training for district leadership
- Established senior Welsh political figures to speak about race relations to a mainstream audience. Sort of to try and set a good example from the top
- We are working with faith organisations and BME organisations and can help provide advice and guidance on access and design issues for disabled people
- Courses about different religious beliefs
- All the above have a valuable part to play
- Case Law

These results suggest that a mix of different formats and information would be useful, but that good practice sharing, debate and guidance could be the best way to move forward with future work in this area.

9 Who should provide these tools?



Examples of other sources stated were:

- Education
- Humanists and secularist associations. The humanist voice is too fragmented
- By National Govt. I refer to Welsh Assembly Government

- The BHA
- Prison Authorities
- Access Groups such as ours, as there are specific cross-equality issues, e.g. the provision of accessible prayer rooms, the design of faith buildings etc
- All
- Universities, as well as all the above
- Unions
- Welsh Local Government Association

The results of this question show clearly that people working in the 'religion or belief' equalities field look to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, National Government and Equality Bodies for increased information on the 'religion or belief' field.

10. Are there any other comments which you wish to make regarding 'religion or belief' equality and human rights work?

- Where do human rights feature in this debate?
- Faith is an important part of a person's identity and local communities. Local faith groups are undertaking a great deal of community cohesion projects and social work. They are vital to the work we do as a local authority and they have a great deal more potential. Engaging churches and faith groups from across the spectrum is invaluable. We do however need clarity about how the new faith strand will operate in relation to sexual orientation
- The EHRC can provide a neutral space for discussion and the development of respect
- Lack of accountability and assessment of social cohesion at local level. Prejudice of officers and elected representatives perpetuated, without redress. Sexism, homophobia, racism and in relation to diversity of belief. Allegedly funding constraints. Local Councillors seem ignorant or dismissive; police have reactive strategy, not preventative. MPs appear aware but unable to progress issues. Some positive policy but minimal proaction
- It is vital to keep highlighting the belief aspect of the legislation and the needs / wishes of non religious people because too many assumptions can be made that everyone follows a religion. It's also vital to be aware that this legislation can clash head-on with sexual orientation legislation and to provide clarity about how to resolve these clashes. The scale of exemptions that religious organisations have is worrying and open to abuse and this can be hard for local authorities to influence when they commission services through religious organisations
- This strand is treated differently to the other 6 - exceptions are made which allow discrimination - this should not happen
- The religion or belief strand has effectively been hijacked by the so called "faith communities" - by definition these are unrepresentative as the overwhelming majority of the population say they have no contact with organised religion and when asked to rank "things that are important to them" unfailingly put religion last. The legislation appears to have gone beyond the protection of an individual's right to hold a religious belief into the deliberate privileging of those minorities with strong religious belief. Examples include

the constant demand for "faith" rooms or "prayer" rooms in the workplace - i.e. the employer (and ultimately their customers / service users) are forced to pay for space used by a very small minority of their workforce

- There is often insufficient support for disabled people or for self-support and self-organisation of disabled people, particularly in line with the social model of disability in BME and faith communities. Similarly, many organisations working in this area of equality and diversity have very little or no understanding of the social model of disability or how to apply it and rarely engage in dialogue with disabled people's organisations. This has implications for independent living, for education, for the right to life, for access to buildings and events, to name just a few issues
- Some of these issues are quite challenging for me as an equalities and diversity local authority officer who is also a humanist. Eg I'm on the SACRE in a work capacity not as a humanist, I'm involved in community cohesion work but again not as a humanist and it is difficult to promote the humanist or non-religious agenda in circumstances where there is no-one there to do that and I'm in a kind of neutral position (or it is assumed that I am a Christian)
- The term 'belief' seems to (wrongly) assume a religious belief
- With regard to 5 above; we will be looking at this but have not started the process as yet and religious/non religious group will be asked to take part
- I would like to see the rights that individuals have no choice about become primary rights which take precedence in the case of conflict with religious beliefs
- People should not believe all that they hear and that they should consult with people on the ground and not people who are in power as they give a slant view on beliefs
- I think that all the work taking place around religion and belief is excellent but only seems to be happening at National level. It is very different landscape at regional/sub-regional/local level where this is patchy at best. There are massive assumptions made that the 'faith' sector is cohesive and talking to each other (with, to my knowledge, very little input from the belief or non-belief sector) and this really isn't happening especially regards strategic representation
- Yes - a recent staff survey highlighted that Christians felt that they were being disadvantaged by people of no faith/beliefs or those of other faiths being better supported
- I do not believe that those with an agnostic or atheist view point represent an equivalent party alongside members of major faiths and the intrusion of these issues is a diversion from the actual challenges faced in the field
- There needs to be a lot more debate and awareness for everyone, on the outcomes of proposed legislation before this is made law
- I think it is very important for people with different religious beliefs and those with no beliefs to work together, in order to promote community relations. I myself am not religious but I do feel there is a role for religious leaders to promote understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other/no faith groups. I am only truly supportive of 'faith based' work if it crosses a number of faiths i.e. 'inter-faith' work. I firmly believe that faith groups need to work collaboratively in order to address and respond effectively to social problems, such as community/racial tension, and to have a positive impact on community relations

- There is continued ambiguity about the way in which the different strands will impact upon issues such as procurement and how strands should be recognised against commissioning services from certain groups that would find it difficult not to discriminate against other groups
- There is a need to develop the religion or belief strand further and what this will mean and look like in the single equality bill. The conference in Birmingham was a useful start.

Thanks

Conclusions

The main conclusion which can be drawn from the survey is that, although understanding of some of the issues may be high, this does not always translate into action. In addition to this, there are still gaps in support in terms of several areas of this equality field.

It is also worth noting that, despite the fact that people with non-religious beliefs should be equal in both theory and practice due to equality legislation, there are some in the field who continue to question the validity of this approach. Two of the general comments above consider 'faith groups' of paramount importance to this debate and one specifically suggests that non-religious views should not be considered an 'equivalent party' in such work.

This is interesting as 66% of respondents said that work to increase understanding between people of different 'religions or beliefs' includes people with non-religious beliefs. However, barriers to participation may still exist as suggested by the 35% which said that their organisation did not include people with non-religious beliefs on an equal basis.

Recommendations

- That National Government and the EHRC take the lead on ensuring that the equality strand of 'religion or belief' is recognised in full
- That all work at local and national level on 'religion or belief' equalities includes representatives of both religious and non-religious viewpoints to reflect this
- That the EHRC and other organisations undertake increased work in the areas of the 'clash' of equality strands, media reporting and stereotyping
- That the EHRC, National Government bodies and Equality Networks consider researching and facilitating good practice sharing, dialogue and guidance in the above fields

Annex A

‘Religion or Belief’ Survey

1. What is your background?

- Local Authority Staff- Equality and Diversity
- Local Authority Staff- Other
- Councillor/ MP/ AM
- SACRE Member
- Voluntary Sector Organisation Staff/Volunteer
- Religious leader (eg Rabbi, Reverend)
- Other
- Individual

2. Did you know that the ‘religion or belief’ equality strand covered those with non-religious beliefs and those with no ‘religion or belief?’

- Yes
- No

3. Do you feel that your organisation engages with non-religious people on an equal level as religious people? (eg the way you involve them in community cohesion work etc)

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know
- Not Applicable

4. Are you involved with work to increase understanding between people of different ‘religions or beliefs’?

- Yes
- No

- Don't know
- Not Applicable

5. If yes, are non-religious people involved in this work?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Not Applicable

6. What do you feel is the biggest issue in the 'religion or belief' equality strand currently?

- Faith Schools
- Clash of equality strands eg 'religion or belief' and sexual orientation
- Exemptions to equality law for 'religion or belief' organisations
- Victimisation or discrimination due to 'religion or belief'
- Community cohesion initiatives
- Public service delivery
- Access to mainstream services for minorities
- Stereotyping
- Negative media reporting
- Continuing privilege of the established Church
- The 'religion or belief' strand being seen as the 'faith' strand
- Other- please state

Other (please specify)

7. Do you feel that you have enough guidance/ information to tackle such issues?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know
- Not Applicable

8. What information would be useful?

- Research
- Good practice sharing
- Debate/dialogue
- Guidance
- Local events
- National events
- Other - please state

Other (please specify)

9. Who should provide these tools?

- Local Authorities
- Regional Government Offices
- National Government
- Equality and Human Rights Commission
- Equality bodies- eg regional networks
- 'Interfaith' organisations
- Voluntary Sector
- Religious Leaders
- Other – please state

Other (please specify)

10. Are there any other comments which you wish to make regarding 'religion or belief' equality and human rights work?