Commission on
Integration&Cohesion

Consultation Submission Form

The Commission on Integration and Cohesion would like to ask seven key questions to national bodies, local bodies and individuals about what practical measures we can take to improve cohesion and reduce tensions in local communities. You may wish to answer all the questions or just those you feel most relevant to you. We also welcome written submissions and examples of local good practice.

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Are your comments on the questions for national bodies, local bodies or individuals?	**National Bodies**

Key Question 1 - What does 'cohesion' mean to you? What does 'integration' mean to you? What might a community which is both integrated and cohesive look like?
The starting point for the NSS vision of cohesion is that it cannot be achieved without an inclusive approach. We have noted that there is a commonly-held assumption that the non-religious have nothing to add to the debate on cohesion, and indeed should not be part of it. For example, there is not to our knowledge any representative of non-religious interests among the COIC Commissioners. Not only do the non-religious have a positive contribution to make, but if they are excluded from the debate, the only cohesion that will occur will be between the already like-minded.

Non-religious people who fear that religious groups already have excessive influence in public life will have those fears confirmed, and this can lead to a wholly unnecessary increase in mistrust between communities.

We believe that there is a current trend to view in terms of *community* cohesion. The COIC Terms of Reference lay emphasis on considering how to work with local communities. But community cohesion is not attained without underlying *social* cohesion, by which we mean individuals in society at ease both with other individuals and with communities.

For the NSS, true cohesion would mean visible parity of treatment and the rule of law so that no group can claim to be above any proper constraints of law. We share Trevor Phillips' concern, expressed in his "sleepwalking to segregation" speech given to Manchester Council for Community Relations on 22 September 2005 that "we have allowed tolerance of diversity to harden into the effective isolation of communities in |

which some people think that separate values ought to apply". It is interesting that two of the four examples he gave to illustrate this point were religious in context.

Key Question 2 - What do you think are the main tensions between different groups in our communities? What factors do you think contribute to these and what are your thoughts about how to tackle them? What role can local leaders play in tackling them?

Our remarks here are limited the main tensions between different groups in the area of religion or belief. The main tensions between different groups arise from segregation and a sense that certain religious groups have favoured access to influence in public life. Segregation arises when public services are aimed at and delivered to and by religious communities. We include faith-based schools in this analysis but the scope of the problem is much wider than that and is increasing as faith-based welfare expands.

Our concern about faith based welfare is that could draw minority communities further into themselves. Even going for welfare to a public facility could provide opportunities to meet people from different backgrounds. We also are concerned that those in communities who are not religious or in dispute with their religious leaders (quite a likely scenario) will simply not receive the welfare to which they are entitled. Making a temple, mosque, synagogue or church the place where welfare is dispensed also strengthens the grip of the religious leader in ways which many in the community may not relish, especially women and the young – and will not those who are homosexual feel further isolated?

One approach to tackle the factors that contribute to these tensions is to challenge the common misconceptions concerning current equality legislation in the religion and belief strand. It is not widely appreciated that the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 apply equally to those of non-religious and religious beliefs, and indeed of no beliefs at all. There is, in our experience, a perception that these regulations are intended to facilitate the needs of religions, and in particular minority religions, and that those of no (or no strong) religious affiliation may have to adjust their practices to their detriment to accommodate them.

An effective publicity campaign could be designed to alert workers and employers to the fact that the scope of the regulations is the whole of the religion and belief spectrum.

We very much regret that the Government both funded and effectively endorsed partisan guides to the Employment Equality Regulations 2003 published on behalf of the major religions. Secularists declined to follow suit on principle. We believe that the ACAS guidelines were even handed and that no more were necessary. We do not believe that the rights of non-believers (or those of a different faith) were given adequate, if any coverage. This is divisive and undermines the very objective of the Regulations.

The role of local religious leaders in tackling tensions is mixed. We are happy to recognise the value of work bringing divided communities together in a constructive way, but the role of religious leaders can also be counter-productive.   Not enough recognition has been given to the fact that reliance on local religious leaders introduces new issues for achieving cohesion and of isolation.

We believe that an undue emphasis on communities to deliver cohesion can on occasion alienate and disenfranchise some members of those communities. This is a particular

danger to look out for in the context of religious communities where the government or bodies such as COIC choose to deal with religious organisations or hierarchies which are not representative by nature. This approach, whilst appearing "inclusive" in fact serves to foster a feeling of alienation amongst certain groups, a danger to which we do not think that sufficient attention has been given. There are numerous categories of those potentially excluded. Some examples are:

1. Individuals who identify themselves as being of a particular religion but who take an unorthodox approach to their religion or who may reject some part or parts of their teachings. Minority groups are frequently under-represented.
2. Those who identify themselves as religious for cultural, social or family reasons but to whom religion is only a small, or even no part of their life.
3. Those who do not wish to state publicly that they no longer belong to a particular religion, sometimes because they fear the consequences of so doing.
4. Women may well be marginalised in a way that purports to be justified by reference to doctrine. Even if this is addressed by specific reference groups for women, there is a danger that women are consulted only on gender-related issues or gender-specific issues and not as equal contributors to all issues across the range.

Religious leaders often hold socially conservative views which adherents of the religion do not share. Addressing cohesion via community leaders such as these can give those leaders greater status and power and can make it harder for the full spectrum of opinion among adherents of a religion to be heard. This not only can silence moderate members of a religious community but also can give a religion a misleading image that it is by its nature more fundamentalist than many of its adherents. This can alienate other members of society.

One of the Government's gravest errors (in our view) was to give such special attention and status to "faith leaders" and the "faith communities". It is a recipe for separation and conflict. It can be saved by putting the spotlight on the people themselves, in all their diversity, rather than asking for representation from "faith leaders" alone.

Another major threat to cohesion comes from the conflation of race and religion both by the Government and by religious groups. The Government does so especially in its interface with minority faith leaders. There is an ambiguity about such liaisons: privately the Government justifies this as a way of facilitating access to disadvantaged members of society but a consequence is that the status of such leaders is enhanced and they become the recognised leaders of the communities of whom they are often not representative, which will all too often result in the alienation of the non-religious, women and younger members of the community.

Religious groups are increasingly seeking to ride on the back of the racial equality agenda with the objective of gaining more power, exacerbating the problems outlined in the previous paragraph. An example of such power seeking was the attempt to disrupt the CRE's Race Convention in November 2006:
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1821629,00.html

This over-emphasis on religious identity has come about because the Government responded to the demands of theocratically inclined "community leaders" for this kind of approach. There is obviously a vested interest for these "faith leaders" to have whole swathes of the population brought under their control by defining them as "faith communities" when in many cases those who have fallen under this umbrella because of their ethnic origins may not even be adherents of the "faith" to which they have been assigned.

We acknowledge that religion is a much more key component of identity for those from some minority ethnic groups than it is for others or the population as a whole. Many Muslims, for example, may want to define themselves as "Muslim" first and foremost – they should of course be free to do this and doubtless their leaders will encourage this. And the Government is obliging by increasingly addressing everyone, especially those from ethnic minorities, by their faith. But this is unwise. By no means are even all Muslims automatically members of the "faith community". And the many millions who are not particularly or at all religious are alienated by such a strategy.

We think it is vital that the Government take the emphasis off religion as a defining factor of "communities". It is counterproductive to approach people in this way in that it reinforces the sense of separateness, differentness and, often, superiority.

There is a strong case for the renaming of the Faith Communities Unit to become simply the Minority Communities Unit and allowing people within those communities to define themselves in the way they want, which won't necessarily be by religion.

Albeit there are questions about how representative "the faith communities" leaders' are' we agree they should be consulted over religious discrimination and over the Religion and Belief strand of the CEHR, but we have severe reservations about a greater scope of consultation. beyond that the idea of consulting "the faith communities" through leaders whose authority is constantly being called into question (Channel 4's Dispatches programme on Monday 15th January 2007 raised very disturbing issues about the role of some religious leaders in fomenting dissent and division.

Key Question 3 - What things do you think help people from different backgrounds feel like they belong? Do you think there are particular values or 'ground rules' for shared life, which are or should be at the heart of society in the UK? What do you think they are?

The "ground rules" for shared life must clearly be a commitment to the application of human rights, together with the rule of law and democracy.

In the context of factors which will help people from different backgrounds feel they belong, the non-religious are in primary need of recognition at state level. The government has a Faith Communities Unit (which allegedly serves the non-religious too but does not routinely contact the NSS, and has not done so at all for some time).

An example of the invisibility of the non-religious is the fact that frequently employers who wish to stress that they are committed to equal opportunities place job advertisements which state that the employer will not discriminate on grounds of a number of irrelevant factors across the six strands, fail to include a reference to non-religious belief. A current example is on the website for the Serious Fraud Office which has, under the heading "Managing Diversity", "No employee or potential employee will receive less favourable treatment due to …their religion…".

One simple and cheap remedy to reassure the non-religious that the government acknowledges their existence, and even values them equally, would be for the Government to ensure that its own advertisements do not omit reference to the non-religious whose rights are protected equally by legislation to those specifically mentioned. In doing this the government would lead by example and set the template for

other employers to follow, and would also help to ensure a greater knowledge of rights and to embed equality legislation into public life.

Prince Charles has expressed a wish to be "defender of faith". For a prospective monarch to make such a partial statement about his future subjects is both tactless and discriminatory, in effect indicating he thinks those for whom faith is not important – at least half of the population – are somehow of less import to him. The very statement could hardly be more divisive.

A key, perhaps the key, factor in uniting a nation is a shared language. If we cannot speak to each other, we cannot understand each other's cultures, nor make friends with people from different backgrounds. <u>More effort must be made to reach people who do not speak English and give them at least a grounding in the language. One scheme that might be worth pursuing is that of "mentors" – people who have had training in teaching English as a Second Language who could attach themselves to individuals (particularly women) in ghettoised communities, and help them to understand the language and the culture in which they are living.</u>

Key Question 4 - Why do you think people from different backgrounds may live parallel or separate lives? Is this negative or positive?

There is no doubt that there is disadvantage in some minority communities which are financially considerably less well-off than others, but steps should be taken to tackle such problems. It is instructive that people from minority communities attain success. Many of those from Hindu and Sikh backgrounds, for example, perform far better educationally than those from other backgrounds (including white English). Those communities that do not do well in education and employment should be encouraged to ask themselves if the practices and customs in their own community are holding them back. Marriage customs that tend to result in non-English-speaking partners being brought from abroad are likely to be a factor.

The Government needs to examine why and how communities segregated along religious lines have come about, especially in northern cities, and what they can do to prevent the spread of this phenomenon, and even to reduce the current incidence. Once such communities become established it will fuel demands for separate schools and other facilities, including health care and even in the future, we believe, hospitals. (Call for faith-based NHS services http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/6253409.stm 12 January 2007)

Some sections of the Muslim community seem particularly isolated and unattached to the majority community. Once again, the influence of religious leaders on these communities can encourage isolationism as the Dispatches programme showed, and this is another reason to take the emphasis off religion in Government dealing with these communities.

Key Question 5 - What role in contributing to community cohesion and integration do you see for organisations and institutions
such as: local authorities, the police, the health service,
schools, youth organisations, faith groups, inter faith and
race equality bodies, housing associations, private sector
bodies, voluntary organisations, theatres, art centres, sports
associations, and the media? (Please comment on as few
or many as you wish).

The role of faith groups and interfaith bodies in promoting cohesion needs careful scrutiny. We detect an uncritical approach on the part of the government (e.g. the Faith Communities Engagement Team) which assumes that such bodies are of necessity forces for good to be encouraged.

All these organisations have a part to play, but it is important that they are not permitted to hijack attempts at achieving cohesion as a means of promoting their own agendas – such as the exertion of religious control over their adherents. This can be inimical to cohesion. Religious groups that attempt to build bridges to the wider community are to be welcomed, but those that seek to entrench a sense of separation and "specialness", or superiority should be discouraged.

We would not wish to deny good work that such bodies can do in breaking down barriers but the unrelenting emphasis on faith in this context both misses the point and is counter-productive. These groups are deliberately exclusive and decline to include the non-religious. This raises the question "with whom do they wish to cohere?" Their sphere of influence is too small. Both the non-religious and those who are not very concerned are likely to be specifically excluded from the arena of such work, or at least at risk of being alienated by it. Approaching people via their faith whether they choose to be addressed in that way or not can also trap them in an identity not of their own choice which cannot be a positive step for cohesion.

To give some sort of perspective to the importance of the work promoting good relations work being carried out by and within the faith communities, it is instructive to consider the relative proportions of the religious and non-religious in society. A ready reliance on census figures to answer this question can be misleading.

According to the 2001 Census, the non-religious constitute 16% of the population - (23% if "not stated" responses are included). These figures are recognised by academics to be grossly understated, as many of the 72% recorded as Christians have little connection with any church. Doubt is similarly cast on them by the ODPM's report "Review of the Evidence Base on faith communities". Our Submission in 2005 to the Office of National Statistics on the 2011 Census explores these points forensically. It concludes that the 72% broadly represents the proportion of the population brought up in nominally Christian households.

The Home Office Citizenship Survey, carried out in the same year as the Census, confirms this and paints a starkly different picture from the 72%: indeed, the proportions of religious and non-religious almost change places. When asked "what says something important about you if you were describing yourself", religion came just ninth in the list of priorities. Even more significantly, four times as many thought religion was not important to their identity as those who did. A middle way would suggest the population is split fairly equally between the religious and non-religious.

Whatever their numbers, the non-religious are feeling increasingly marginalised; they are the only group the present Government still finds it respectable to ignore. At best, work by faith and inter-faith bodies can only be partial and must, for the sake of efficacy, be supplemented by non-faith based initiatives. If it is delivered without a counter-balance it may even do more harm than good by fostering and reinforcing the divisions it seeks to challenge.

The question includes schools as one of several institutions on which comments are invited.

One of the largest threats to long term cohesion is the Government's own well-

intentioned but misguided programme of opening minority faith (and largely minority ethnic) schools. This will create an increasingly apartheid education system, even if nominally such schools claim to be open to those of all faiths although rarely for those of none. It will also create an environment where community and religious pressure will cause moderate Muslim families who have integrated – not just the children at the school - to return to a segregated environment. Women in the UK feel more obligated to wear hijab than in many other countries, and than in the past, and this is a manifestation of the pressure referred to above.

If the Human Rights or political objection to not opening these schools is because of the large number of Christian schools, the danger to future cohesion is so great that it would alone justify transferring Christian schools to LEA control and abandoning discriminatory entry arrangements for all faith schools.

Ruth Kelly called for an "open and honest" debate when launching the Commission on Integration and Cohesion on 24 August 2006. Reports of this also indicated that Ms Kelly said Church of England Schools were among the most 'diverse' in the country. And she said Muslim parents should not be denied the same opportunities offered to Christians and Jews in sending their children to faith schools. But she did suggest faith schools could be encouraged to play sports matches against each other, or twin themselves with schools of a different faith."

This defensiveness about faith schools was interpreted as even being an unwillingness of Ms Kelly for faith schools to form part of the debate.

There is a growing concern that Ruth Kelly is bending over backwards to ignore anything, however harmful, that give rise to criticism of faith schools, whether Christian or of other faiths. This could not be more unfortunate because schools are the single most important area of government intervention over cohesion as the UK sleepwalks into apartheid education by promoting minority religious (which are also largely minority ethnic) schools.

Studies by Dr Bruegel of South Bank University have debunked the self-serving fallacy about faith schools "playing sports matches against each other, or twin themselves with schools of a different faith".

"We argue that it is important to distinguish between ongoing and sporadic contact, especially where the former is part of day to day accepted routines and the latter is artificially structured to 'address' difference. However worthy and imaginative, such contact will tend to be distorted by prior group identification amongst potential rivals (Holme 2005: Klein 2005). We looked at one particular twinning between primary schools in the North to get a feel for its impact on the white children. There were positive aspects to it. One school governor noted that the children in the Moorside village would otherwise not see an Asian until, and unless, they went to the town's sixth form college. He felt that the mixed race children in the school benefited from the contact –'they came alive', because people were 'talking about things that were meaningful to them'.

"But the children from the village referred to the twin school, as 'the brown school', 'down there'; they couldn't remember any of the children's names because they were 'difficult to pronounce' and the visits of the children did little if anything to assuage the sense of grievance of the white parents that the outer areas were losing out in funding to 'Banglatown', for example in the closure of the sixth form in the all white semi-rural secondary school. The children from the white community envied the resources of the inner city school, but treated their days out as external to them and their concerns. The twinning earned the school 'brownie points', but appeared to make only a very superficial

difference to attitudes."

Key Question 6 - What help do new people to a community need when they arrive? What help do existing residents need to cope with change in their community?

Language, language, language. They also need a mentor that would help them understand the culture that applies here: everything from soap operas to democratic elections, how the transport system works and the practicalities of the school system. It might be possible for the Government to set up a voluntary scheme of mentors who would want to carry out this work. The mentoring system should be administered independent of faith, and mentors should be chosen for their expertise in this role rather than simply for being a member of any particular community.

Key Question 7 - What do you see as effective ways to counteract people's negative perceptions of and attitudes to people from different backgrounds?

The best way to counteract negative perceptions arising from a person's religion or belief is to have public life blind to religion. If no group is privileged or disadvantaged then there need be no perception of unfair treatment. People find it easier to welcome diversity when they do not feel under threat. The best way to put this into action in the short term is to use existing equality legislation in its full terms and effects to ensure maximum familiarity with it, especially among groups which may be unaware that it serves them.

We remain concerned that there is widespread public ignorance that the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 offer protection for non-religious belief systems. Publicity in this area would allow the Regulations to be seen in their true light as a protection to individuals' human rights rather than perceived as a weapon for minority groups to claim privilege.

Secondly, another way to counteract negative perceptions is to ensure that non-representatives faith "leaders" are not given undue prominence in being the face of a religion/sect/denomination. We refer to our comments on Question 2 for discussion of this point. There, however, we emphasised the dangers for individuals and for true cohesion by reliance on non representative leaders. Here we wish to stress the role that such people can play in creating negative perceptions which can attach to people nominally of the same religion but whose views are quite different. Naturally, "leaders" can speak out as they wish but to embed them unthinkingly into the process of cohesion and integration will reinforce negative public perceptions and be counter-productive.

Thirdly, a higher profile in the media of positive images – that do not always depend on religion. Although the Kumars at No 42 was a comedy programme it was an excellent example of showing people from minority cultures how the cross-over can be achieved. It didn't have anything to do with religion and was much better for it. If "faith leaders" are permitted to dictate how minorities are seen, they will be completely misunderstood and the "human-ness" will be sidelined. We need to be able to see people from minority communities as people who struggle with the same day-to-day issues that we all do (see also characters in popular soap operas, few of whom are religious, but nearly all of whom are rounded and sympathetic).