| **THIFF Forum Meeting Minutes: Faith, Community & Coronavirus** |
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| **Location:** | Online |
| **Date:** | Monday 1 June |
| **Time:** | 2-4pm |

## **Welcome – Rev Alan Green, Chair**

PC Poolman, Met Police was now unable to join the meeting due to unforeseen circumstances, but Abbas Mirza from Bart’s Heath Trust would now be speaking.

## **Update of work of THIFF – Rev Alan Green, Chair**

Council has been fully engaged with faith communities.

THIFF worked together with the council to send out messaging re closure of places of worship to ensure that there was no fragmentation – this worked very well.

THIFF worked with THCVS and Tower Hamlets Volunteer Centre to publiscise volunteer opportunities – over 2000 volunteers signed up throughout the period.

Lots of work on death, funerals, and bereavement – also ensuring joined up messages and that health partners understood the faith needs of communities. The THIFF website also links to all major faiths and for those of no faith so that partners understood the different needs. THIFF also supported the Bart’s chaplaincy team to source volunteer chaplains.

THIFF took part in the Mayor’s faith meetings, where it transpired that the Somali community felt that they were being overlooked and not involved, so they were connected into the Bart’s Health team to ensure their representation.

Discussions with the public health team were very good, they made the discussion wider than just Tower Hamlets, but other North East London boroughs too.

THIFF, working with partners, also issued messaging for Ramadan and Eid and supported the East London Mosque/Tower Hamlets Homes Community Iftar which saw over 3000 participants join in – a clear sense of standing together as usual albeit virtually, to spread the key message that we are all together.

Focus is shifting to the re-opening of buildings – it is vital that there is a clear joined up strategy across the borough for all faiths.

There has been very good engagement during the pandemic but it has also revealed some of the weaknesses of structure of the forum, which has always worked with little formal structure but the downside is it that there is no formal representation from some faith comms.

## **Abbas Mirza, Community Engagement Lead, Bart’s NHS Trust**

Has been working to support the coronavirus work across East London since March to provide an opportunity to share and provide support to all denominations in Tower Hamlets and the wider East London area.

One of the first issues was around end of life and funerals.

The work is supported by THIFF and partners across London – there is a good partnership of working. The Trust has learned about work going on and how it can use faith communities to get issues out and to hear the communities needs for support from them and hopefully these partnerships will continue into the new normal.

The Trust did a lot of work around Eid, Holy Week, and Passover to make sure people were safe and informed – this worked very well.

There has been discussion with Tower Hamlets partners, including THIFF regarding the reopening of buildings to ensure that there is no sudden increase in the opening of buildings and that the learning is shared – do not want to see another spike.

A&E departments across the Trust are very quiet. There are covid free wards available - if you are ill, do not be put off coming back into system, this also applies to primary care.

A group is being set up to look at the new normal for outpatients’ appointments. Very keen to hear input from faith communities

Coronavirus has brought us together and the health team are keen to continue relations hips with communities, there has some great connections and great work, there are challenges ahead for everyone – this brings the possibility of lots more joined work.

**Comments**

Matt Hopkinson: Works for the NHS looking at capacity and demand and the issues facing bereavement services across North East London. They held a workshop last week and are holding another one soon – action plan for solutions locally and system wide – anyone interested in getting involved contact [matthewhopkinson@nhs.net](mailto:matthewhopkinson@nhs.net)

Tony Collins: Works with unpaid cares – 3.5K clients – most extremely vulnerable category – people need clear advice re access to advice/appointments –access to info on this for respective faiths would be helpful as would up to date briefings that he can pass onto carers.

Rt Revd Dr Bishop Joanne Woolway Grenfell: Most faith communities have been trying there best to respond. Varity of different views of church goer on the reopening of buildings. Buildings must be made safe. Churches have been involved in wide variety – social engagement, food banks, online services, homeless needs. Churches done great job in partnership with community groups. Lots of reflection for the future.

Alan Green on reopening of buildings:

* May be some provision before July 4 for buildings to open re private prayer – strong feeling that this has to be interpreted locally, once we allow for the youth of our population – TH is the fourth highest rate of death for covid in London behind Newham and Hackney.
* Very important we take account – level of deaths, BAME community, large Asian community, affects deprived and lots of overcrowding – TH very y vulnerable indeed. National guidance needs to be interpreted carefully.
* THIFF will be putting out a statement, together with public health and the council and convening meetings with faith reps later in the week.

Question – are there good communications flowing between all faith communities or are some harder to engage with?

Answer - Communication is difficult - smaller mosques who are not in contact really with council of mosques, the communities look after themselves in order to preserve their culture – the nature of THIFF is to not be authoritative but have an open door that people can come into .

## **Mayor John Biggs, Tower Hamlets Council**

Tower Hamlets has been the 4th worst hit borough - cannot afford to become complacent.

Many people work in face to face occupations e.g. retail, transport. Borough has high BAME population, who are more at risk of serious complications.

Need community leadership – the council has been working with faith groups to send out information, reassurance and to signal a hopeful way forward.

Tower Hamlets is a densely populated area. Public transport and social distancing is very hard but need to work to avoid a second peak of infections.

Communities need economic activity – thereby lies a dilemma. Many people been furloughed or lost jobs – no one knows how long it will take for economy to pick up.

The reopening of buildings needs a risk assessment approach so that every venue, organisation and workplace is safe. Large gatherings should not happen until safe – but it is big challenge and it is better to be cautious than risky.

Finally – some may sense that we need to be cautious about opening up – feel free to get in touch and share views if people feel that we need to approach things differently.

## **Discussion Session**

* Schools doing online learning and good pastoral care, all children are tracked and supported. Children have come back happy and secure about being back – even those that have been
* East London Mosque furloughed a lot of staff, now looking at how the mosque can be socially distance. There are real practical concerns about this being enforced.
* Churches working to have social distancing, also making sure that vulnerable clergy are not pressured to go back until safe.
* Churches - real challenges in trying to keep own community together but wonderful stories about getting to know others and to be a resource for helping local people – a bit of a mix.
* Chaplaincy – has moved to virtual chaplaincy and it is working well. Some members of Canary Wharf team are classed as vulnerable. As the area opens up the estate owners may ask for physical presence chaplaincy – this may not be feasible.
* Carers organisations - work load has doubled, now looking at re opening beginning of July. Developing website with broad range of interactive webinars for Carers. Entrusted with managing list of Carers who lost someone due to covid – looking now at working around bereavement and grief – may be good to get a faith perspective on this.
* School pupils may need to find a way to mark their bereavement, how can this be accommodated?
* Post coronavirus – depression levels will be high – also suicide rates.
* Online therapy sessions - a real opportunity for an online spiritual community – it has been enhanced and the breakout rooms really facilitate these connections, so be an opportunity rather than a hinderance.
* Universities - big impacts due to the recruitment of international students – many universities highly dependent on these fees.
* Reopening places of worship also involves the needs of groups that use the premises. Also, for tourism.

**Links shared during the meeting:**

United Reform Churches information on reopening: <https://urc.org.uk/images/Communications/New-Normal-2020.pdf>)

Royal Foundation of St Katharine's work Bart’s Health Trust on step down care for patients leaving hospital but not able to go home and the offer of free mental health mini breaks to NHS staff and their families: [www.rfsk.org.uk](http://www.rfsk.org.uk)

**The next forum meeting is on Monday 3 August 2020 at 2pm and will be held online, focusing on financial hardship in Tower Hamlets. Please visit** [www.faithintowerhamlets.org/](https://www.faithintowerhamlets.org/) **for further information.**