TEN YEARS OF THE FAITH COVENANT



An independent evaluation by

Centre for Inclusive Evaluation

Coventry University

About this research

This evaluation was undertaken by **the Centre for Inclusive Evaluation (CIE)** and **Coventry University**, on behalf of **FaithAction** and **the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society**.

The research was led by Dr Dan Range and Dr Aurélie French, who have extensive experience designing and delivering evaluations that combine robust research methods with practical insight into how programmes operate in real-world settings.



Dan is a specialist in the evaluation of community and partnership-based programmes and has led numerous evaluations of initiatives involving collaboration between public bodies, civil society organisations and faith communities.



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CIE is an organisation specialising in participatory and practice-based evaluation of programmes working at the intersection of public institutions, communities and civil society. The research was conducted with academic support from Coventry University, which provided ethical oversight and wider institutional guidance throughout the study. This partnership combined CIE's practitioner-focused evaluation approach with the rigour and ethical standards associated with university-supported research. See **www.inclusive-evaluation.co.uk**.

About FaithAction

Since 2006, FaithAction has been working to unlock the potential of faith groups to bring about a healthier, more just society where more people belong. Working in collaboration with a national network of faith-based and community organisations, we bring strategic, sustainable, and research-grounded solutions to societal problems.

See **www.faithaction.net**.

About the APPG on Faith and Society

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society is a cross-party group of MPs and peers, chaired by Zöe Franklin MP, who work together to highlight the contribution to society by faith-based organisations, to identify best practice, and to promote understanding of the groups providing innovative solutions around the country. FaithAction acts as the secretariat for the group.

See **www.faithandsociety.org**.

Acknowledgements

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CONTENTS

Foreword 4

Executive summary and recommendations

Executive summary 6

Recommendations 8

Introduction

The Faith Covenant 14

This evaluation 16

Methodology

Approach 18

Research ethics and anonymity 19

Limitations 20

Findings

1. A framework for trust and collaboration 23
2. How it works in practice 33
3. Conditions shaping its effectiveness 42
4. Embedding in policy and systems 49

Conclusion 56

References 59

Foreword

The Faith Covenant was an early initiative of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Faith and Society, formed in 2012. The idea for an agreement between councils and faith communities emerged from a series of roundtables held by the APPG, during which faith leaders described to us work they were doing, and the barriers to engaging with local councils.

Chief among these were challenges around trust. Faith communities felt a certain suspicion from councils regarding their fitness for public service delivery. Were they really just out to convert people? Would they make proper use of public money? The Covenant was conceived as a tool for alleviating some of this apprehension. For councils, it served as a tool to help build long-term partnership with faith-based organisations delivering social action.

33 Covenants have been signed so far, covering over 12 million people. In this period, we've experienced sustained economic pressure, and the global pandemic which placed unprecedented strain on our public services. We've navigated cost of living crises, refugee crises, and the shockwaves of global conflicts which resonate in our own neighbourhoods. The need for partnership has never been greater, and faith communities have been prominent in their front-line role in serving the most vulnerable.

But what of the Faith Covenant? Against a backdrop of challenge and change, has it succeeded in its ambitions? Small-scale reviews have been carried out over the years, but the Covenant's effectiveness has never been comprehensively evaluated. That's why I'm delighted to welcome this report, which sets out to do just that.

I am heartened by the evidence of deepened trust between faith communities and local councils, increased day-to-day collaboration, and improved rapid response in moments of crisis. The Faith Covenant has clearly not provided a once-and-for-all solution to the challenges of cross-sector working. Yet there is clear evidence of much being achieved through Faith Covenants. It is a model that can be celebrated, strengthened and built upon. The insights and recommendations within these pages should be heeded by Government, councils and faith groups alike.

With local government reorganisation underway, we have an opportunity to embed some of these principles in the development of new councils. There are also, I'm sure, lessons to be carried across to the implementation of the new Civil Society Covenant, which ought to ensure the faith-based sector remains a core partner nationally and locally.

The need across our society is great. Faith communities have proved themselves willing and effective partners. I hope this report can encourage sustained relationships, and collaboration across sectors and faiths, as a contribution to stronger and safer communities.



The Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP
Minister of State for Social Security and Disability
Founding Chair of the APPG for Faith and Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Executive summary

This evaluation finds that the Faith Covenant plays a meaningful and constructive role in strengthening relationships between faith communities and statutory partners. Across many areas, it has helped to formalise previously informal relationships, providing greater structure, legitimacy and visibility to partnership working. This has improved communication, created clearer routes for engagement and, in some cases, enabled more coordinated responses to local and national needs. The Covenant has been particularly effective in supporting rapid, coordinated responses during moments of pressure or crisis. It also can play a preventative role, where strong relationships help to address tensions before they escalate. Overall, the Covenant has contributed to improved collaboration between local authorities and faith communities, particularly where it is actively used as a collaboration framework rather than a symbolic commitment.

The evaluation was based on a mixed methods approach designed to capture the experiences of those directly involved in Covenant activity. A total of 58 participants – including faith sector leaders, local authority officers, elected officials and Members of Parliament – were drawn from 13 Covenant areas or represented national stakeholders. The interviews and survey were conducted iteratively between October 2025 and March 2026, supported by a Theory of Change framework and triangulated across datasets.

The data shows that the Covenant is most effectively implemented where it builds on existing relationships and is supported by consistent engagement, clear governance and continuity of key individuals. In these contexts, it moves beyond a statement of intent and becomes a practical mechanism for collaboration, supporting joint working, improving communication and enabling more effective local responses. The Covenant appears particularly strong in reinforcing and strengthening partnerships that are already in place, and in providing a shared framework that partners can draw on in both proactive and reactive contexts.

Where the Covenant operates well, a number of consistent features are present. These include continuity of key individuals who act as coordinators or advocates within local systems, clear resourcing, and regular points of engagement such as steering groups or forums. Successful areas also demonstrate a shift from one off engagement towards ongoing, relationship-based working, where the Covenant is used as a reference point for collaboration rather than a static document. In these contexts, the Covenant helps to create shared expectations, legitimise partnership working, and provide a structure through which communication and joint activity can be sustained over time.

However, the evaluation also highlights a number of challenges.

There is no single or uniform model of the Covenant, and its effectiveness varies significantly depending on local context. Capacity and resource constraints were consistently identified as limiting factors, particularly where responsibility for maintaining the Covenant is unclear or where there is insufficient support to sustain engagement. The Covenant's reliance on key individuals can also create fragility where roles or personnel change. In these cases, activity can stall and expectations may not be met. The Covenant, to realise its potential as a driver of change, requires sustained investment over time to realise its potential.

Looking forward, the Covenant sits within a shifting policy landscape that presents both opportunities and risks. The government's renewed focus on social cohesion, including an emphasis on resilience and partnership working, aligns closely with the outcomes associated with the Covenant. At the same time, the introduction of the Civil Society Covenant and wider local government reorganisation raises questions around overlap, alignment and the potential dilution of the distinct role of faith-based partnerships. Together, these developments create a timely and pivotal moment for the Faith Covenant. There is an opportunity to strengthen its positioning within wider systems, while ensuring that its unique contribution, particularly the reach, trust and volunteer capacity of faith communities, is clearly articulated and retained.

Recommendations

With these findings in mind, this report presents the following recommendations:

01 **Strengthen national leadership and visibility** of the Covenant

02 Embed the Covenant within **wider policy opportunities**

03 Use **local government reorganisation** as an opportunity to review, strengthen and embed Covenant networks

04 Support implementation of **the Civil Society Covenant (CSC)** through protecting, promoting and resourcing the distinct role of faith

05 Pursue **dedicated resource** for Covenant areas

06 **Strengthen local Covenants**

07 **Strengthen local governance and shared ownership** of the Covenant

08 Create a **capacity building and development offer** for Covenant areas

09 Commission **further research** on the wider impact of the Covenant

01 Strengthen national leadership and visibility of the Covenant

APPG on Faith and Society

The APPG should continue to promote the Faith Covenant as a framework for constructive partnership between faith communities and statutory bodies and explore opportunities to strengthen its visibility within national policy discussions. This could include continued engagement with government departments, parliamentarians and national sector bodies to give practical examples of the contribution that Covenant partnerships can make to addressing social challenges at local level.

Central Government

Government should revisit prior recommendations and commitments to explore wider national promotion and rollout of joint agreements between faith and statutory partners, such as in the 2023 Bloom review and Sir Keir Starmer's letter to Faith Leaders from June 2024, building upon lessons learned in a decade of Faith Covenants.

02 Embed the Covenant within wider policy opportunities

Central Government

Government should actively consider the role that local Covenant networks may play in supporting implementation of the 2026 Social Cohesion strategy, including its potential contribution to boosting faith and belief literacy, supporting national consultation around integration, and partnering response to emerging tensions or unrest.

APPG on Faith and Society / FaithAction

FaithAction should work with the APPG on Faith and Society to regularly situate the Covenant in the wider policy landscape, utilising the Faith Covenant Forum and other channels to communicate and gather insight, challenges and best practice from local Covenant areas.

FaithAction / Local Covenant partners

During the Covid-19 years, local Covenants played an important role in enabling local responses to a public health crisis. FaithAction, together with existing and prospective Covenant areas, should explore the potential for extending Covenant principles into health and care sectors to support prevention. This could include developing strategic partnerships with NHS Trusts, Integrated Care Boards or place-based forums.

Local Authorities

Work under the Covenant has already focused on activity and policy relating to equalities, faith literacy, social cohesion, public health and emergency response. There is potential for better integration of Covenant activity into these policy areas by forging stronger links with relevant teams and across Covenant networks. An area of potential growth and opportunity here would include working with Integrated Care Boards and place-based teams to further integrate faith-sector working with neighbourhood health ecosystems.

03 Use local government reorganisation as an opportunity to review, strengthen and embed Covenant networks

Local Covenant partnerships

Local Authority areas undergoing reorganisation should seek to use the opportunity to embed the Covenant more formally within emerging governance arrangements, ensuring that faith and community partners are recognised as part of cohesion and resilience infrastructure. This should happen in consultation with faith communities and inter-faith fora.

04 Support implementation of the Civil Society Covenant (CSC) through protecting, promoting and resourcing the distinct role of faith

APPG on Faith and Society / FaithAction

The APPG and FaithAction should consult with Covenant areas to hear views on how CSC might integrate with Faith Covenant work locally. Key findings and insights should be relayed to Central Government and groups such as the Civil Society Council.

In areas seeking to combine or align the Faith Covenant and CSC, the APPG on Faith and Society and FaithAction should provide targeted support and guidance to ensure that the specific strengths and functions of the faith sector – such as volunteer capacity, trusted leadership, and local reach – are retained, visible and effectively embedded within any new structures.

Central Government

In the context of an evolving civil society landscape, the unique role of faith networks in contributing to community wellbeing and cohesion should be safeguarded. There is clear value in maintaining Faith Covenants and Civil Society Covenants as separate, but related and complementary, frameworks, and Central Government should demonstrate awareness of this when implementing the CSC.

Central Government and national partners should consider work under the Faith Covenant, particularly concerning crisis response and in areas of deprivation, in decisions on how to implement the CSC and also where to allocate targeted funding under the CSC. This would best be informed by insight from Faith Covenant areas themselves.

Local Covenant partnerships

Existing Covenant areas should actively seek to join any consultation on embedding CSC principles with existing work under the Faith Covenant.

05 Pursue dedicated resource for Covenant areas

FaithAction / Local Covenant partnerships

Many Covenant areas operate with limited capacity and rely heavily on voluntary engagement and officer goodwill. FaithAction should explore opportunities to secure further funding or partnership support that could strengthen the Covenant network nationally, and local Covenants. This could include support for coordination, peer learning between Covenant areas and the development of practical resources that help sustain local partnerships.

In light of the new Social Cohesion Strategy and its focus on resilience at local levels, this could include FaithAction and local authorities making a case for funding related to resilience and community tension management.

Local Authorities

To offer good value for money, where existing Covenant areas align with those identified for CSC funding, consideration should be given as to how this funding could strengthen existing Covenant work and priorities, and avoid duplication of effort.

06 Strengthen local Covenants

Local Covenant partnerships

Evidence suggests Covenant activity is most effective when faith and local authority partners focus on specific local priorities or themes. Covenant areas may benefit from identifying a small number of shared priorities (for example loneliness, social cohesion or health and wellbeing) around which collaboration can be structured and progress reviewed. Identifying such priorities should take an inclusive approach and feature co-production.

Covenant areas should take time in the early stages of formulating the commitments to map social action that is already happening and to co-produce agreement about what implementation of the emergent commitments could look like.

07 Strengthen local governance and shared ownership of the Covenant

Local Covenant partnerships

To sustain momentum over time, Covenant areas should ensure that governance arrangements are clear, inclusive and embedded within existing local structures. At minimum, this should involve clearly articulated and mutually agreed ways of working and could include the regularity and location of meetings, as well as identifying named contacts with responsibility for the Covenant within both the faith and statutory sectors. At the same time, governance should remain flexible to adapt to shifts in the partnership or ways of working where needed.

Covenant areas should identify strategies for ensuring accessibility of Covenant activity to all parts of the local faith community, including grassroots groups. This may involve considerations around language used, timings and locations of meetings, and communication channels. Areas may also consider determining periods after which Covenant principles are reviewed or *"re-signed"*, giving opportunity to take stock of changing demographics or newer representation.

08 Create a capacity building and development offer for Covenant areas

FaithAction

FaithAction should develop further practical guidance and resources to support both existing and prospective Covenant areas. This could include accessible case studies, examples of governance structures, practical implementation guidance and tools that help areas translate Covenant commitments into sustained local activity.

APPG on Faith and Society / FaithAction

Many Covenant areas have expressed a wish for more effective peer learning. FaithAction and the APPG should develop regular forums (building on the Faith Covenant Forum) or peer-learning opportunities. These should be dedicated to sharing good practice, strengthening networks and supporting Covenant areas to embed the Covenant and work more effectively.

09 Commission further research on the wider impact of the Covenant

APPG on Faith and Society / FaithAction / research partners

This evaluation represents the first systematic assessment of the Faith Covenant but further research could build on these findings and deepen the evidence base. Future studies could include comparative research involving areas that have not adopted the Covenant, explore the experiences of community beneficiaries and undertake a value-for-money assessment of Covenant-related collaboration. This may require more in-depth research in certain geographical areas that enable contextual analysis.

There may also be value in exploring approaches to evidencing preventative impact, including methods for assessing whether the Covenant contributes to reducing tensions, enabling earlier responses to emerging issues or place-based health initiatives. While such outcomes are inherently difficult to measure, given the challenge of demonstrating events that have not occurred, developing approaches to capturing this preventative or resilience-building effect could strengthen understanding of the Covenant's wider contribution to social cohesion and local partnership working.

INTRODUCTION



The Faith Covenant

The Faith Covenant (or 'Covenant') is a framework designed to strengthen collaboration between faith communities and local authorities. The Covenant was developed in recognition of the role that faith communities already play in addressing social challenges and social wellbeing across the UK. Faith organisations are often involved in delivering or supporting activity related to public health, social care, education, employment support and community inclusion and the Faith Covenant was created to enable faith-based organisations to work more closely with local authorities in responding to social need. As a flexible framework, the Covenant invites local authorities and faith communities in each area to develop locally appropriate commitments, reflecting local priorities and circumstances.

The first Faith Covenant was signed by Birmingham City Council in December 2014. Since then, the Covenant has been adopted by 33 local authorities across the UK, covering a combined population of more than 12 million people. In June 2024 shortly before becoming Prime Minister, the Leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, wrote to faith leaders across the UK recognising the contribution of faith-based organisations to communities and public life. In the letter he highlighted the role that local Faith Covenants can play in strengthening partnerships between local authorities and faith groups and expressed support for promoting them as a mechanism for collaboration at community level.[1]

Several organisations have played important roles in developing and supporting the Covenant.

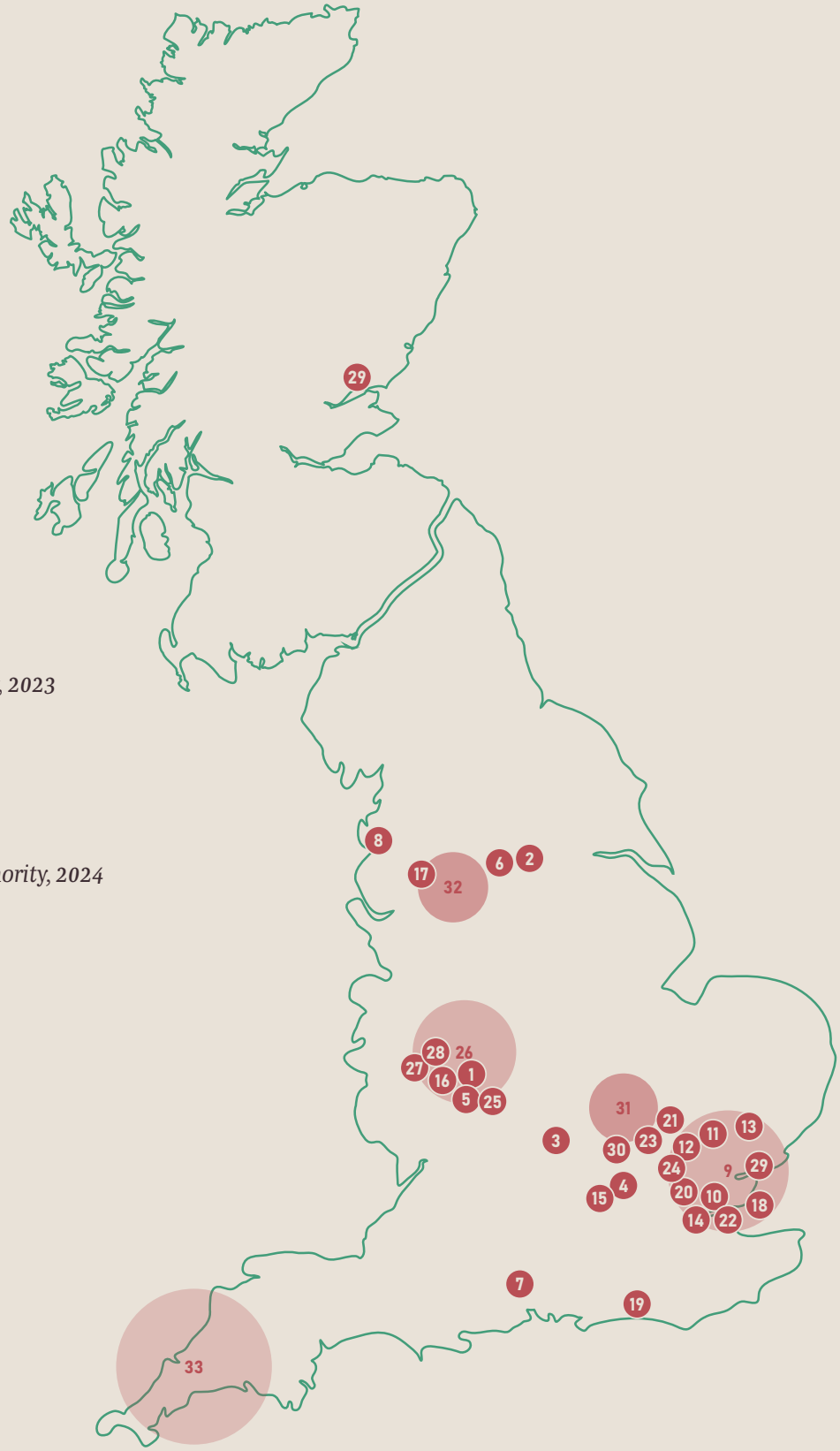
The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Faith and Society was instrumental in drafting the original Covenant framework and promoting its adoption among local authorities and faith communities.

FaithAction – a national organisation which delivers projects, undertakes research and represents the interests of faith-based organisations within national policy discussions – has supported the development and implementation of the Covenant, not least in their role as secretariat to the APPG.

1 This document can be accessed here: www.faithaction.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/A-letter-to-Faith-Leaders-from-Keir-Starmer-100624.pdf.

The Faith Covenant has been signed by 33 local authorities covering over 12 million people.

1. *Birmingham, 2014*
2. *Leeds, 2015*
3. *Northampstonshire, 2015*
4. *Barnet, 2015*
5. *Solihull, 2015*
6. *Calderdale, 2015*
7. *Southampton, 2017*
8. *Blackpool 2017*
9. *Essex, 2017*
10. *Basildon, 2017*
11. *Braintree, 2017*
12. *Chelmsford, 2017*
13. *Colchester, 2017*
14. *Maldon, 2017*
15. *Brent, 2017*
16. *Wolverhampton, 2017*
17. *Preston, 2018*
18. *Rochford, 2018*
19. *Brighton and Hove, 2018*
20. *Brentwood, 2019*
21. *Uttlesford, 2019*
22. *Castle Point, 2020*
23. *Harlow, 2020*
24. *Epping Forest, 2021*
25. *Coventry, 2023*
26. *West Midlands Combined Authority, 2023*
27. *Sandwell, 2023*
28. *Walsall, 2023*
29. *Dundee, 2023*
30. *Welwyn Hatfield, 2023*
31. *Hertfordshire, 2024*
32. *Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2024*
33. *Cornwall, 2024*



This evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to independently assess how the Covenant has operated in practice since its introduction and to evaluate the difference it has made to collaboration between faith communities and public bodies, grounded in the understanding that effective collaboration better serves their communities.

In doing so, the research seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the Covenant's contribution to partnership working and to identify lessons that can inform its future development.

The evaluation was designed around the following key aims and objectives:

- **Document and analyse implementation approaches,** examining how the Covenant has been adopted and implemented across different local contexts since signing.
- **Assess impact on policy and practice**, including the ways in which the Covenant has influenced collaboration, governance and partnership working between faith communities and statutory bodies.
- **Identify limitations and areas for improvement,** drawing on evidence from stakeholders involved in Covenant activity.
- **Synthesize findings for wider application,** identifying lessons that may inform policy and practice across the public sector.

Alongside these objectives, the evaluation was also designed to capture practical learning from Covenant areas in order to better understand how the framework operates in practice. In addition to assessing the Covenant's impact to date, the research therefore sought to document the experience of those directly involved in its development and delivery, with a view to identifying insights that may inform future implementation.

This work forms part of a wider research initiative supported by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust examining ten years of the Faith Covenant and its contribution to collaboration between statutory bodies and faith communities in the UK. The project aims to strengthen the evidence base surrounding the Covenant and to capture learning from its implementation across different local contexts, helping to inform future policy discussions and cross-sector partnership working involving faith communities.

METHODOLOGY



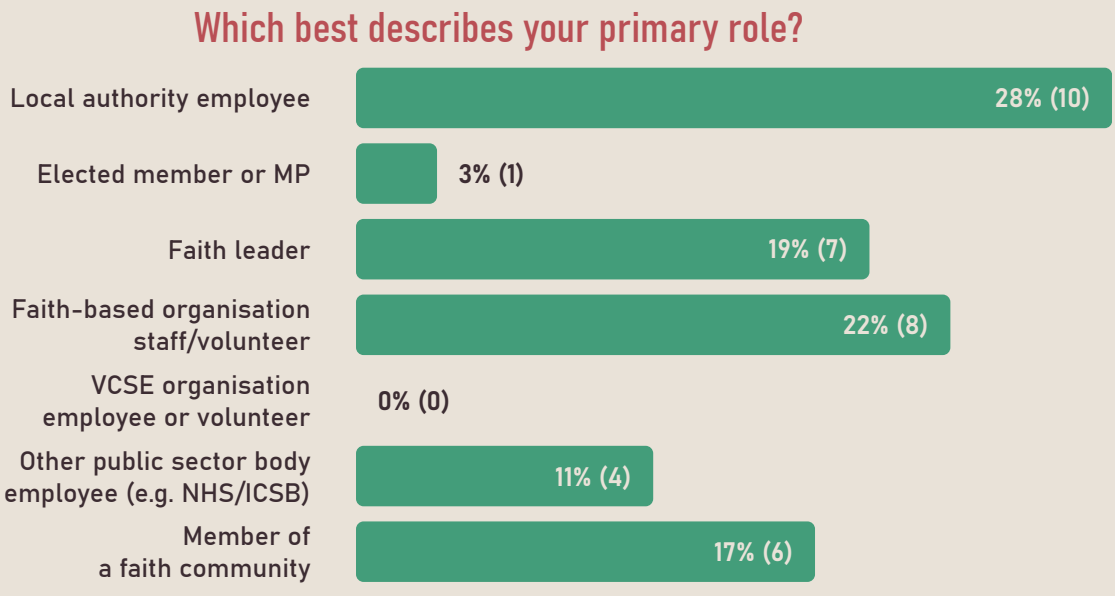
Approach

The evaluation adopted a mixed methods and iterative research approach designed to capture the experiences of those directly involved in the development and implementation of the Faith Covenant. The research was initially guided by a Theory of Change framework, which helped structure early conversations around the intended purpose of the Covenant, the activities associated with it, and the outcomes it is expected to generate. This provided a conceptual starting point for the research while allowing sufficient flexibility for participants to describe how the Covenant operates in practice within their local contexts.

Semi-structured interviews formed the first stage of the research. Interviews were conducted in a series of tranches between October 2025 and February 2026. An initial list of contacts was provided by FaithAction, resulting in a first tranche of nine interviews.

Interviewees were also asked to recommend additional participants through a process of referral, which resulted in a further seven interviews in tranche two and nine interviews being conducted in tranche three. In addition, three interviews were conducted with staff from FaithAction. In total, twenty-six interviews were completed, each lasting between approximately 30 and 75 minutes. Conducting interviews in stages allowed the research team to review and analyse findings as the research progressed, refining interview questions and exploring emerging themes in greater depth as the evaluation developed.

Insights from the interview phase informed the design of a short questionnaire intended to test and extend emerging findings across a wider group of participants. The questionnaire was distributed to 100 potential respondents in December 2025 and remained open for a one-

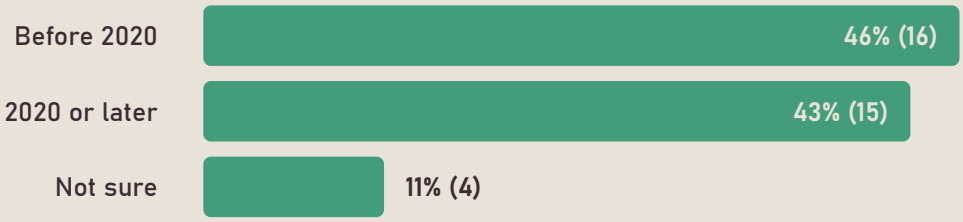


month period, during which two reminders were sent. A total of 36 responses were received. Of these respondents, 11 had also taken part in an interview, providing an opportunity to triangulate perspectives across the two data sources.

Across interviews and survey responses, the evaluation engaged a total of 58 participants. Respondents represented a mix of faith sector leaders, local authority officers, elected officials and Members of Parliament.

Participants were drawn from 13 Faith Covenant areas, as well as representatives from FaithAction and the APPG on Faith and Society. The participating areas represented a diverse range of contexts, including both urban and rural locations and areas where the Covenant had been led primarily by either faith organisations or local authorities. Some areas had long-established Covenants, whereas in other areas it was relatively new. This approach enabled the evaluation to capture a broad range of experiences of how the Covenant operates across different local settings. The evaluation team were also mindful to include a broad spread of people with differing tenures and associations with the Covenant.

When was the Faith Covenant in your area first signed?



Research ethics and anonymity

The evaluation was reviewed and approved through Coventry University's ethics processes to ensure that appropriate safeguards were in place for all participants. This included measures to ensure informed consent, confidentiality and the responsible handling of research data. Through Coventry University's ethics framework, the research team established appropriate data management and data protection arrangements to ensure that participants could contribute safely and that their identities would remain anonymous within the reporting of findings. All data collected as part of the evaluation has been handled and stored in accordance with these ethical and data protection requirements.

Limitations

As with all evaluation research, this study has several limitations which should be considered when interpreting the findings. The primary qualitative data for the evaluation was gathered through interviews and survey responses with individuals who are directly involved in Covenant activity within their areas. As such, participants were typically those already engaged with the Covenant and therefore more likely to have experience of its operation. This reflects the primary purpose of the evaluation, which was to capture and analyse the experiences of those implementing the Covenant in practice and to draw lessons from these perspectives. Nevertheless, this focus may mean that the research reflects the views of those most closely involved in Covenant networks rather than a wider set of external stakeholders.

The research also included interviews and survey responses from participants across 13 Covenant areas. While this provides coverage across a diverse range of contexts, it represents a proportion of the total number of Covenant areas currently in operation. In some cases, multiple responses were gathered from the same area, allowing for deeper analysis of certain local experiences, while in others, the evidence base was more limited. This variation reflects the voluntary nature of participation in the evaluation but should be recognised when considering the balance of perspectives represented.

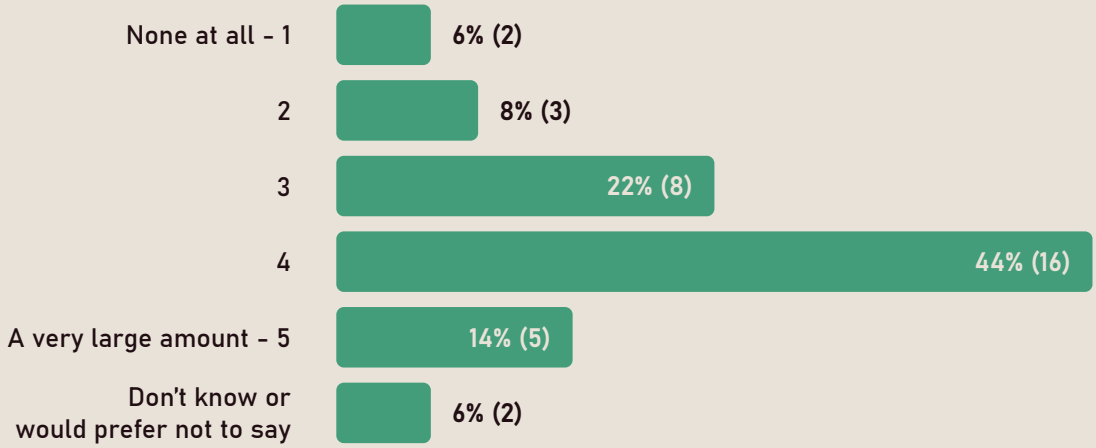
These limitations do not undermine the strength of the findings presented in this report, which draw on a substantial body of qualitative evidence. However, they do highlight opportunities for future research to build on this work by engaging with a wider range of stakeholders, including communities within Covenant areas, local authorities that have not adopted the Covenant, and additional Covenant networks not represented in this evaluation.

FINDINGS



Interviewees and survey respondents largely viewed the Covenant as successful in their local areas and the data in the graph below is illustrative of this. This provides an important context for the findings that follow, which deliberately highlight constructive reflections and areas for improvement alongside examples of effective practice.

How much success do you think the Faith Covenant has had in your area?





1. The Faith Covenant as a framework for trust and collaboration

Across the interviews and survey responses there was strong agreement that the primary function of the Faith Covenant is to provide a framework for trust, dialogue and collaboration between faith communities and statutory partners. While the scale and nature of activity varied across areas, participants consistently reported that it meets this primary function, describing the Covenant as helping to formalise relationships, legitimise engagement and create opportunities for more coordinated partnership working. The findings below explore how this framework operates in practice.

Key findings

- **The Faith Covenant primarily functions as a framework for trust and collaboration,** formalising relationships between faith communities and statutory partners and providing a recognised platform for dialogue and partnership working.
- **Its value lies less in direct resources and more in influence,** enabling collaboration, legitimising engagement and amplifying existing activity between faith organisations and public bodies.
- **The Covenant strengthens legitimacy and visibility for faith communities,** helping embed them more confidently within local civic life and policy discussions while creating clearer entry points for engagement with councils and other institutions.
- **It is most effective when it builds on existing relationships,** reinforcing trust and enabling coordinated responses to local challenges and crises, while in newer contexts the process of signing and working through the Covenant helps establish trust between partners.

Perceptions of value

Participants frequently described the value of the Covenant in terms of its ability to support practical outcomes for local communities. While interviewees recognised that the Covenant itself does not provide direct funding or resources, many emphasised that it plays an enabling role by strengthening collaboration and amplifying activity already taking place.

One County Council interviewee described the Covenant as *"a way of showing support from the public sector point of view for faith communities and faith work… obviously you can't just*

sign it and then do nothing." The same interviewee also reflected that "*the Covenant doesn't have a budget… it has influence… it is just there to amplify work that is happening, to be able to showcase great work.*"

…it gives recognition through credibility and clout.

For some interviewees, particularly those closely involved in the process, the act of signing the Covenant was also viewed as a significant milestone. Among local authority representatives it was sometimes framed as a professional achievement, reflecting progress in developing stronger relationships with local faith communities. Within the faith sector it was often interpreted as recognition of the contribution and role of faith organisations within local civic life with one interviewee stating that "*it gives recognition through credibility and clout*".

Relational and symbolic importance

Linked to these perceptions of value, the Covenant carries relational as well as symbolic importance for many stakeholders.

For many participants, the Covenant also helped formalise relationships that were already more informally in existence. One interviewee described this as "*The Covenant formalised something that was already beginning to happen informally.*" Survey data showed that most respondents perceived the Covenant as jointly owned, with 56% indicating that responsibility sits across both faith and statutory sectors rather than with one party alone.

This came concomitant with a perception of how these formalised relationships of the Covenant were also of symbolic importance to local communities. One participant noted it had helped create "*more robust actions because the council is involved… and it gives more credibility, more clout to faith leaders.*" In fact, 75% of respondents felt that the Covenant in their area had increased recognition, legitimacy, and visibility for the work of faith actors in their communities.

In several areas the signing of the Covenant was marked through public ceremonies or events, reinforcing its symbolic significance. As one faith-sector interviewee reflected, local political leaders were "*very pleased to stand… and say as a local authority we wish to be seen to support faith communities and to recognise the role they play in the life of the borough.*"

In a number of areas, the act of signing the Covenant also became a source of local pride, with stakeholders referencing when the Covenant was signed, by whom and under what circumstances as markers of local commitment to partnership working.

Role in legitimising engagement

A key mechanism through which the Covenant supports collaboration is by legitimising engagement between the faith sector and statutory bodies. At the organisational level, the signing of the Covenant signals that engagement with faith communities is both supported and expected. This was particularly evident among local authority and county council officers, who reported that the Covenant provided both confidence and permission to pursue partnership working.

One faith-sector interviewee described how *"the relationships were already there, but the Covenant gave us the confidence and the mandate to work together more openly. It formalised what was already happening and made it easier to bring people together."*

Similarly, another participant noted that the Covenant *"provided the framework for conversations to take place and to give the local authority confidence that the faith communities were in a position to deliver."* A local authority officer described this more simply as giving *"licence…for people to put their heads together with a project."*

Within the faith sector, the Covenant was also seen to elevate the perceived legitimacy of faith organisations as partners in civic activity. Faith leaders described using the Covenant as a reference point when approaching local authorities or elected representatives with ideas for projects or collaborations.

> …the Covenant gave us the confidence and the mandate to work together more openly. It formalised what was already happening and made it easier to bring people together.

However, while this strengthening of legitimacy was generally viewed positively, it also raises potential questions about whether the Covenant may reinforce existing networks of influence or local gatekeeping structures if participation is not broadened over time.

Evidence of improved collaboration

The legitimising effect of the Covenant was frequently linked to tangible examples of improved collaboration. Interviewees described a range of activities that had been enabled or strengthened through Covenant-related relationships, from relatively small initiatives such as the display of faith-related messages on council-owned screens, to participation in consultations on strategic policy areas including Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategies, the handling of cremation and burial rites, or wider community safety initiatives.

Overall, data shows that in the majority of cases there has been an increase in collaboration between faith groups and statutory bodies in Covenant areas.

Increased collaboration improves winter support response

What happened?

In one area, the Faith Covenant enabled a coordinated response to winter pressures affecting vulnerable residents. A local authority team used the Covenant to convene faith partners quickly to expand provision, including warm spaces and food support. Existing relationships meant organisations were identified and engaged early, with clear roles agreed around hosting, volunteers and referrals. As one officer noted, *"the structure and relationships were already there to build on."*

So what?

Established trust and clarity enabled a more efficient and coordinated response. Faith organisations helped shape delivery as well as provide support, improving relevance and reach. Duplication was reduced, communication improved and the local authority was able to work through trusted community networks with greater confidence.

Now what?

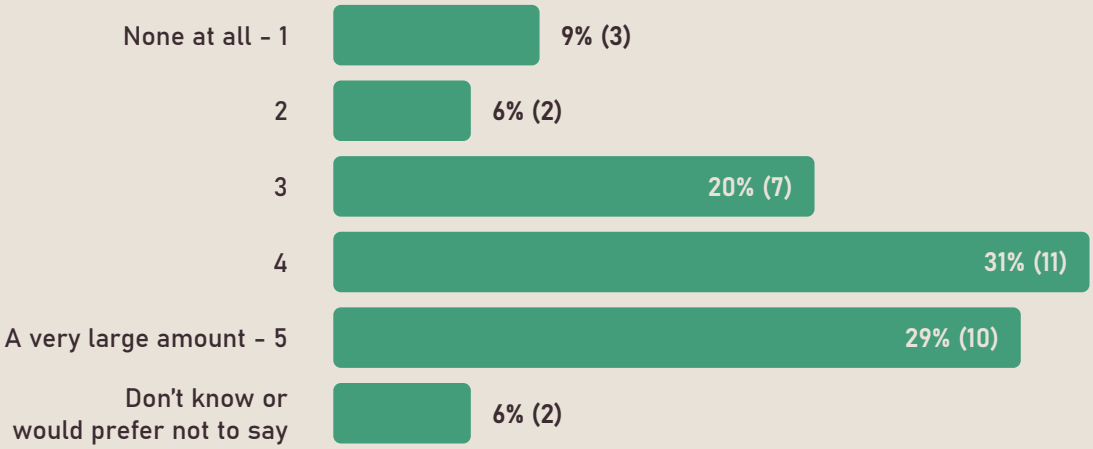
As this coordination was directly attributed to the Covenant, maintaining and embedding these relationships has been seen as essential for future responses in the local area. This has enabled more medium and long-term planning to take place with less reliance on reactive measures in times of anticipatable need.

Only 9% of respondents have seen no change at all.

At a practical level, the Covenant also appears to facilitate initial connections between individuals who might otherwise not interact regularly. As one interviewee explained, prior to the Covenant *"you wouldn't necessarily have known who to have conversations with… it does allow that dialogue to happen. You know who to go to."*

Similarly, another participant described the Covenant as acting as a *"gateway"* through which conversations and

To what extent has the Faith Covenant contributed to improved collaboration between faith groups and statutory bodies in your area?



collaborations could begin. On the faith sector side, the Covenant was seen as providing a recognised entry point for engagement with local authorities and elected representatives. In several areas this was cited as helping faith organisations initiate new projects or partnerships that might otherwise have been more difficult to pursue.

Rapid response to crises

One of the most consistent findings from the interviews was the role the Covenant can play in supporting collective responses during periods of challenge or crisis. This also aligns with the recognition of the wider contribution of faith communities to responding to social crises by Sir Keir Starmer in June 2024. This acknowledgement specifically cited the role faith organisations have played in supporting communities through periods of austerity, the COVID-19 pandemic, overseas conflicts and the cost-of-living crisis.

While this was not identified as a primary objective of the Covenant at its inception, many interviewees highlighted this as one of its most practical benefits. Survey data supports this perception, with 64% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that the Covenant had made it easier to respond collectively during moments of challenge or crisis, compared with only 8% who disagreed.

Interviewees described how existing relationships and communication channels established through the Covenant enabled partners to act quickly when needed. One faith-sector participant reflected that *"having the Covenant in place gave us the mandate to be proactive rather than reactive…*

> …64% of respondents [agreed or strongly agreed] that the Covenant had made it easier to respond collectively during moments of challenge or crisis…

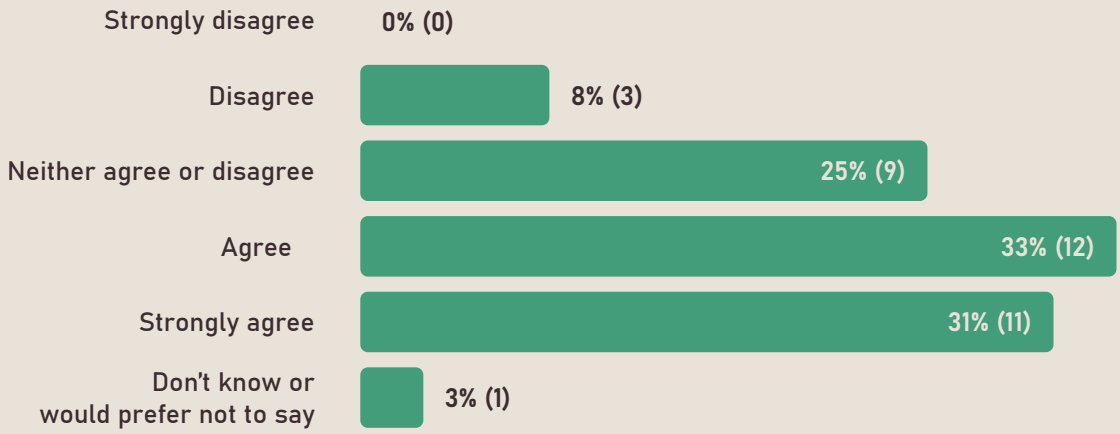
we could bring people together quickly and say this is the right thing to do." A local authority interviewee similarly noted that because "*people had already been around the table together… it was relatively easy to organise something quickly.*"

Examples cited included collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic, responses to local community tensions, and efforts to address wider cohesion challenges. These are times when quick action can keep people safer and be more cost effective and so the important role of the Covenant here should not be understated.

Recent national policy developments also place increasing emphasis on the concept of resilience within cohesion policy. The government's 2026 social cohesion strategy highlights the importance of strong local relationships and trusted networks in enabling communities and institutions to respond effectively to moments of tension, misinformation or crisis.[2] In this context, the Covenant could be understood not only as a framework for partnership working but also as a mechanism for building local resilience. By fostering ongoing dialogue, trust and channels of communication between faith communities, civic leaders and public authorities, it creates the conditions through which information can be shared quickly, coordinated responses can emerge, and potential tensions can be addressed before they escalate.

At the same time, it is important to recognise a common challenge in evaluating impact in initiatives of this nature: the difficulty of evidencing

The Faith Covenant has made it easier to respond collectively in my area during moments of challenge or crisis.



2 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2026) *Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive and resilient United Kingdom*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom. Accessed on 16th April 2026.

Rapid crisis response during COVID-19 in a coastal city

What happened?

During the COVID-19 lockdown, partners in a coastal city were able to respond quickly to emerging community needs through relationships strengthened under the Faith Covenant. Local authority officers and faith leaders already had established contacts and communication channels. The Covenant acted as *"the gateway into allowing those conversations to happen,"* enabling partners to mobilise rapidly when lockdown restrictions created urgent welfare needs.

So what?

Because partners already trusted one another and knew who to contact, a rapid response was organised to support vulnerable residents. Faith organisations were able to mobilise volunteers and distribute food to people who were isolated or struggling during lockdown. The local authority was able to work through these trusted community networks, ensuring that help reached communities quickly. This gave confidence that resources were being used appropriately and was able to happen *"because people had already been around the table together… it was relatively easy to organise something quickly."*

Now what?

The practical value of the Covenant in times of crisis was noted by partners and there was appreciation that the ability to respond quickly was not created by the crisis itself but by the relationships and communication channels that already existed. Maintaining those relationships has therefore been seen as essential to ensuring that similar rapid responses could be mobilised in future emergencies.



a negative outcome. Where strong relationships and early communication help prevent tensions from escalating into visible conflict or civil unrest, this success is inherently difficult to quantify or attribute. The absence of incidents does not easily lend itself to traditional measurement approaches. However, interviewees repeatedly pointed to the value of having established networks and trusted points of contact in place prior to moments of pressure, suggesting that the Covenant plays an important preventative role even where its impact may not always be captured through conventional metrics.

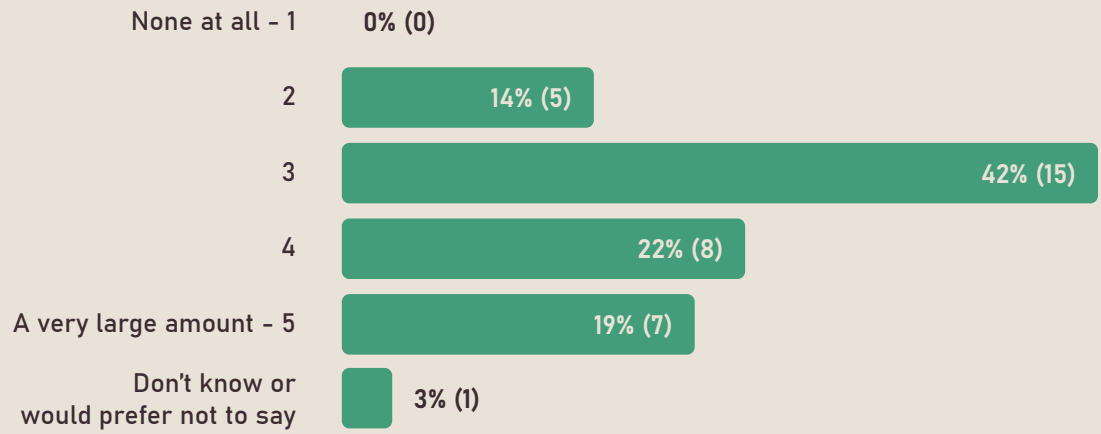
Works best where relationships already exist

Despite these positive outcomes, the data also suggests that the Covenant itself is rarely the primary catalyst for partnership activity. In most areas participating in the research there was already evidence of interfaith or multifaith engagement prior to the signing of the Covenant, with the Covenant being seen as marking an important moment in an already ongoing process (as outlined above). Survey data indicates that 41% of respondents felt there had been either a large or very large amount of interfaith activity before the Covenant was introduced, compared with only 14% who felt there had been very little.

As one faith-sector interviewee explained, *"the trust was already there from working together before. The Covenant came off the back of that, rather than creating it from scratch."* This is corroborated by findings from the survey data where 89% of respondents felt that previously existing relationships have been significant factors in shaping the impact of the Covenant in their area.

This finding suggests that the Covenant is most effective when it builds upon relationships that are already developing. It also indicates that the

When the Faith Covenant was signed, how much inter-/multi-faith activity was already taking place in your area?



presence or absence of a Covenant should not be interpreted as a proxy measure for levels of collaboration between the faith and statutory sectors within an area and that areas that have not signed are not always *"cold spots"* for this. Interviewees pointed to places with high levels of joint working between the faith and statutory sectors that have not signed the Covenant.

A trust-building process

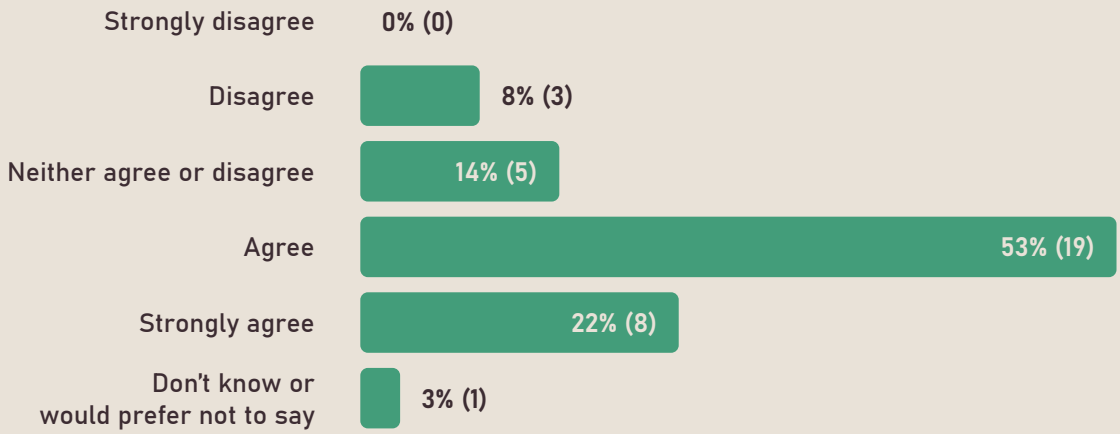
Finally, the evaluation indicates that the process of signing and implementing the Covenant can itself contribute to the development of trust between sectors. Survey data shows that 75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Covenant helped build trust between partners, compared with only 8% who disagreed. This suggests that the Covenant is not only a reflection of existing relationships but can also play an active role in strengthening them.

> ...75% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Covenant helped build trust between partners...

Trust is often defined as *"the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another"*.[3] This definition is particularly relevant to the Covenant, which requires both faith communities and statutory partners to signal a willingness to rely on one another in the pursuit of shared local goals. The act of signing the Covenant therefore represents more than a symbolic gesture; it represents a mutual acknowledgement that collaboration

3 Rousseau, D. M., Sitkin, S. B., Burt, R. S. and Camerer C. (1998) 'Introduction to Special Topic Forum: Not so Different after All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 393-404.
Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/259285. Accessed on 17th April, 2026.

The Faith Covenant has helped build trust between faith communities and statutory partners in my area.



involves a degree of reliance, openness and shared responsibility.

Interviewees frequently described trust as both a prerequisite for collaboration and an outcome that is strengthened through partnership working. As one local authority participant observed, *"I would say there is a good level of trust, otherwise we wouldn't be able to get these things done quickly."* This reflects the wider literature which describes trust as a *"lubricant of action"*,[4] reducing friction in relationships and enabling organisations and individuals to work together more effectively. Where trust is present, partners are more willing to share information, make decisions collectively and act with confidence that others will follow through on agreed actions.

In areas where relationships between faith groups and statutory bodies were already well established, the Covenant tended to reinforce and formalise trust that had been built over time. In areas where collaboration was less developed, the process of signing and implementing the Covenant often acted as a starting point for building those relationships. In both contexts, the Covenant appears to function most effectively as a framework that supports the development and maintenance of trust over time rather than as a mechanism that can generate collaboration independently of those relationships.



The act of signing the Covenant ... represents more than a symbolic gesture; it represents a mutual acknowledgement that collaboration involves a degree of reliance, openness and shared responsibility.

4 Mollering, G. (2005). 'Rational, institutional, and active trust: Just do it!?' In Bijlsma-Frankema, K. & Klein-Woolthuis, R. (eds.) *Trust Under Pressure: Empirical Investigations of Trust and Trust Building Under Uncertain Circumstances.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. Pp 17-36.

2. How the Faith Covenant works in practice

This section explores how the Faith Covenant operates in practice across participating areas, focusing on the practical mechanisms through which it is implemented. The evidence suggests that while the Covenant provides a shared framework, its operation varies significantly between areas depending on local structures, resources and leadership.

Key findings

- **How the Covenant operates in practice varies widely between areas,** reflecting local governance structures, leadership, resources, and existing partnership arrangements rather than a single prescribed model.
- **Signing the Covenant is an important symbolic milestone but not sufficient on its own,** with sustained impact dependent on ongoing governance, operational coordination and continued engagement between partners.
- **Effective implementation is supported by clear coordination, leadership and active championing,** particularly where senior local authority support, engaged officers and trusted faith sector advocates help sustain momentum and embed the Covenant within organisational practice.
- **In practice, the Covenant functions as a mechanism for connection and collaboration,** enabling access between councils and communities through faith networks, supporting policy engagement and facilitating a wide range of locally driven activities aligned with community needs.

Signing the Covenant

In most areas included in this research, the Covenant was signed following a collaborative and consultative process involving both local authorities and faith sector organisations. Draft commitments were typically developed jointly by councils and faith representatives, often followed by consultation with wider faith communities or, in some cases, broader public consultation before the final document was agreed.

Signing events were frequently organised as celebratory public ceremonies hosted by the local authority. These events often served to reinforce the symbolic value of the Covenant and to demonstrate public commitment to partnership working. One example described how, during a signing ceremony, each faith community was invited to bring an object representing their faith which was then placed in the county hall afterwards.

However, interviewees were clear that signing alone does not create impact.

In several cases, high-profile signing ceremonies were later regarded as largely symbolic where they were not followed by ongoing activity or clear governance arrangements. Participants repeatedly emphasised that signing should be viewed as the beginning – or way marker – of a process rather than its conclusion.

On the whole though, the survey data showed that, for the majority of respondents (69%), the Faith Covenant had either got more impactful over time or had maintained its impact, and 70% felt that there had been a positive impact in their area on *"business as usual"* relationships between statutory partners and the faith sector.

In many areas, the organisations involved in signing were already connected through existing relationships or networks, and in several cases both local authorities and faith actors were already familiar with the work of the Covenant's national actors, FaithAction and the APPG. While there have been some more recent examples of Covenants emerging through less established connections or *"completely out of the blue"* (FaithAction interviewee) these appear to have benefited from the broader visibility and momentum created by earlier signings. This again highlights the importance of existing relationships in the early stages of Covenant development.

> ...70% felt that there had been a positive impact in their area on "business as usual" relationships...

> ...signing should be viewed as the beginning – or way marker – of a process rather than its conclusion.

Support for areas considering signing the Covenant is currently provided on request but is largely ad hoc and there has never been a fully funded role to support new signings. Interviewees suggested that additional guidance or practical resources to develop implementation strategies post signing could help strengthen this stage of the process, particularly for areas with less experience of interfaith or cross-sector partnership working.

Governance structures

There is considerable variation in the governance structures used to support the Covenant across different areas. These differences relate to who participates in governance, how meetings are organised, the resources available to support activity and the frequency with which partners meet. Data from surveys and interviews both strongly suggest that clear governance structures and coordination (or the lack of) have had impact in shaping the outcomes of the Covenant.

In many areas, the Covenant does not create entirely new governance

structures but instead builds upon existing local arrangements. Existing interfaith forums, faith leader networks or community partnership groups are often adapted to incorporate Covenant-related discussions and responsibilities. This reflects the fact that Covenant activity rarely emerges from a blank starting point but instead sits within a wider ecosystem of local collaboration.

Some interviewees suggested that the absence of a fixed governance model is a strength rather than a weakness. The flexibility of the Covenant allows areas to adopt structures that are appropriate to their local context and avoids creating additional administrative burdens that might deter participation.

> ...Covenant activity rarely emerges from a blank starting point but instead sits within a wider ecosystem of local collaboration.

At the same time, governance arrangements often reflect existing power dynamics within local partnerships. Faith sector representatives frequently expressed a degree of comfort, but not idealised satisfaction, with local authorities taking a more directive role in convening meetings and coordinating activity as this reflects the established working patterns between sectors. What participants tended to value most was the existence of regular opportunities to meet, discuss shared concerns and maintain dialogue.

An additional observation from the research was that many interviewees had not previously considered the fact that the Covenant is not a legally binding agreement. There are no legal or financial sanctions associated with non-compliance. Rather than being seen as a weakness, this was often interpreted positively. Participants felt that the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms reflects the trust underpinning the relationships involved and avoids creating barriers that might discourage organisations from participating.

> The flexibility ... allows areas to adopt structures that are appropriate to their local context and avoids creating additional administrative burdens...

In some areas, Covenants have been formally renewed or re-signed to update commitments or reinvigorate activity. These re-signings are typically seen as either an opportunity to rejuvenate activity or to further embed the Covenant. One example of the latter includes how a revised Covenant was approved by the council's executive board, effectively embedding the Covenant commitments within formal council policy and increasing their ability to act within the organisation. Here an interviewee stated that *"because of resource commitments, trying to work smarter, not harder, we've looked at the Covenant and realised that a lot of the principles in there are very similar"*.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that re-signing the Faith Covenant sparks life into dwindling arrangements without there also being tangible changes in governance and resourcing.

Operational co-ordination

Operational coordination was identified as an important factor influencing how effectively the Covenant functions. Interviewees frequently emphasised that the Covenant works best where those involved have a clear understanding of its purpose and how it is intended to operate in practice. Several participants suggested that tools such as a shared theory of change or logic model could help clarify expectations and support more consistent implementation.

There is also a recognition that Covenant activity exists alongside a range of other interfaith and partnership forums. In some areas this has created pressure on officer time and the limited capacity of faith volunteers. As a result, some areas have sought to streamline governance structures by consolidating multiple forums into a single meeting structure. As one council participant explained, *"we had the Faith Leaders forum, the Faith Covenant Steering group and then Interfaith forum. So last year we decided there's too much to handle, so we consolidated all those meetings into one."*

Examples of effective implementation were often those where Covenant activity was focused around specific themes or priorities.

Examples of effective implementation were often those where Covenant activity was focused around specific themes or priorities. In one area, the Covenant initially adopted an annual thematic focus, beginning with 'loneliness', which helped partners concentrate activity and understand the types of change taking place under the Covenant banner. This approach was viewed positively as it helped translate the Covenant from a statement of intent into a practical framework for action.

...tools such as a shared theory of change or logic model could help clarify expectations and support more consistent implementation.

Importantly too, 58% of respondents were able to point to tangible real-world change in how organisations cooperate in their area as a result of the Covenant. However, where operational coordination was unclear or where ownership of Covenant activity was diffuse, interviewees reported lower levels of engagement and reduced impact.

While practical arrangements for operational co-ordination vary widely

Good practice officer-level co-ordination and advocacy

In one area, the Faith Covenant is sustained through dedicated officer coordination within the local authority. A lead officer acts as the central point of contact, linking faith groups, district councils and public sector partners. This role includes convening and supporting the steering group, maintaining communication channels, and ensuring faith partners are included in service design and partnership discussions.

The officer also brokers connections, directing enquiries to relevant teams and enabling quicker engagement than standard routes. They promote awareness of the Covenant internally, using it to support decision making and legitimise collaboration with faith groups. Externally, they work with district officers to cascade information and maintain engagement.

This coordination role is a part of their job description and is critical to maintaining momentum and translating Covenant principles into practice.

between areas, many interviewees felt that a more formalised sharing of best practices between Covenant areas would be beneficial to the success of their own.

Leadership and championing

Leadership and active championing were repeatedly identified as important factors in determining the effectiveness of the Covenant. Areas where the Covenant appeared to have the greatest impact tended to have visible leadership and support across multiple levels, including senior local authority leadership, operational officers, and faith sector representatives.

Senior leadership within local authorities plays a particularly important role in embedding the Covenant within wider organisational practice. Where the Covenant has explicit support from senior councillors or executives, it is more likely to be incorporated into strategic priorities and operational planning. This can also translate into practical support such as officer time for coordination, administrative resources for meetings and the integration of Covenant commitments into broader policy frameworks.

At the officer level, the Covenant often relies on individuals who act as coordinators or advocates within local authority structures. However, interviewees also noted that awareness of the Covenant can vary significantly within large organisations. As one faith-sector interviewee explained, *"at a higher level, the Council is very clear that we have a Covenant… but lower down, you've got an officer who's working away and doesn't make connections. They may not even be aware of the Covenant."*

Where the Covenant has explicit support from senior councillors or executives, it is more likely to be incorporated into strategic priorities and operational planning.

This highlights the importance of ensuring that the Covenant is embedded within organisational systems rather than dependent on individual enthusiasm alone. Several participants noted that where Covenant activity becomes closely associated with a single officer, there is a risk that momentum is lost if that individual moves on or changes roles.

Within the faith sector, leadership often takes the form of trusted community representatives acting as advocates for the Covenant within their networks. These individuals frequently play an important bridging role between faith communities and statutory bodies, helping to sustain dialogue, promote participation and encourage collaboration. That many of the participants in this research also believe that faith sector partners tend to be in their positions for longer time periods also suggests that fluctuations here may be less likely and pose a lower risk to Covenant momentum.

Access to communities and influence on local policy

One of the most widely cited practical benefits of the Covenant is the way in which it enables access between statutory bodies and communities through faith organisations. Faith institutions often hold trusted relationships within communities that public sector organisations may find difficult to reach directly. Through these networks, councils are able to communicate messages, gather feedback and engage communities in ways that would otherwise require significantly greater effort and resources.

A council interviewee described the Covenant as enabling the authority

…faith sector partners tend to be in their positions for longer time periods … fluctuations here may be less likely and pose a lower risk to Covenant momentum.



...a local crisis response initiative was successful precisely because the council was able to work through churches and mosques to reach communities that it had previously struggled to engage with.

to *"engage faith communities and sort of import key messages to them,"* illustrating the communication channels created through these partnerships. However, some participants were wary that communication could sometimes be perceived as one-directional, and emphasised the importance of ensuring that engagement remains genuinely collaborative rather than purely informational.

Faith leaders also emphasised the importance of identifying and supporting advocates for the Covenant within both sectors. As one interviewee noted, *"one needs to have advocates, both within the faith communities for the Covenant and within the local authority – officers and elected members – who are going to promote it."*

These connections can also influence how policy and local initiatives are shaped by lived experience within communities. One interviewee described how a local crisis response initiative was successful precisely because the council was able to work through churches and mosques to reach communities that it had previously struggled to engage with.

At the same time, interviewees recognised that these relationships can sometimes reinforce existing patterns of representation. Where engagement relies heavily on established community leaders or organisations, there is a potential risk that some groups may be over-represented while others remain less visible within partnership structures. This participant frames this in a positive sense but it is a factor that is more likely to be negative to those sitting outside of the structures *"We already had a good network of faith and community organisations before signing the Covenant… the existing network influenced the Covenant, and it hasn't really changed much."* In many respects this can be a negative aspect of continuity.



...diversity of activity reflects the flexible nature of the Covenant, which allows local partners to adapt its principles to the needs and priorities of their communities.

Activities

Activities taking place under the Covenant banner vary widely between areas and reflect local priorities, resources and relationships. Importantly though interviewees and survey respondents in nearly all Covenant areas were able to cite multiple examples of activities that they directly attributed to the Faith Covenant.

Examples reported by interviewees include interfaith dialogue events, joint community initiatives, collaborative responses to local challenges, policy consultations and practical projects delivered jointly by faith organisations and local authorities. In some areas these activities have focused on a specific issue such as social isolation and loneliness, community cohesion, or health and wellbeing. In other cases, such activities and events were seen as an exercise in strengthening communication between sectors. This diversity of activity reflects the flexible nature of the Covenant, which allows local partners to adapt its principles to the needs and priorities of their communities.

Which of the following activities in your area have taken place as part of or have been supported by the Faith Covenant?



72%
events or forums



56%
community cohesion work



56%
partnerships between faith groups and statutory bodies



47%
joint communications or public statements



47%
crisis or emergency response



47%
partnerships between faith groups



36%
projects or programmes



31%
training or capacity building



28%
service delivery or service access



25%
policy, strategy, or governance changes

3. Conditions shaping the effectiveness of the Faith Covenant

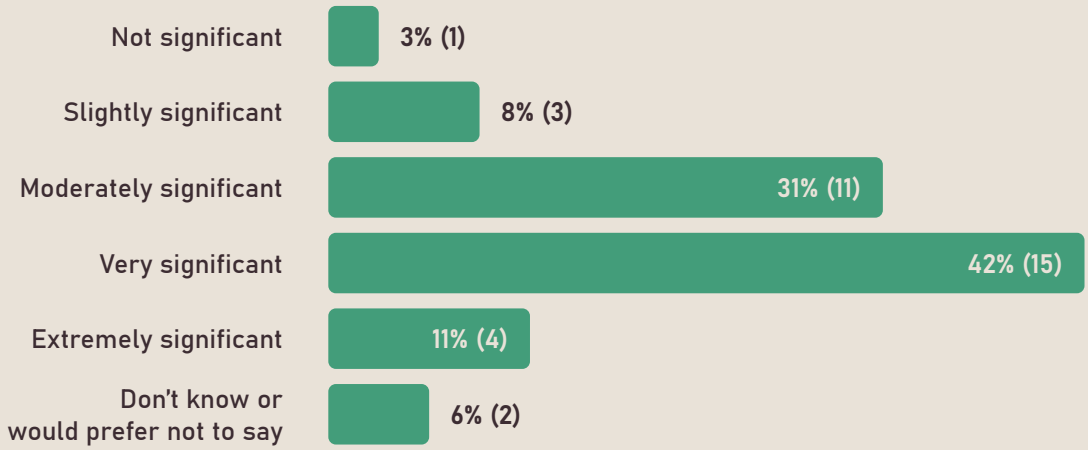
The findings presented in earlier sections demonstrate that the Covenant can provide a practical and impactful framework for collaboration between faith communities and statutory partners. However, the extent to which this potential is realised varies considerably between areas. Interview and survey evidence indicates that the Covenant's effectiveness is shaped by a range of local conditions and that whilst these conditions and factors do not determine whether the Covenant will function successfully, they do strongly influence the depth, consistency and sustainability of activity associated with it.

Key findings

- **The effectiveness of the Faith Covenant is shaped strongly by local conditions,** including leadership, continuity of relationships, organisational capacity and local geography, which influence the depth and sustainability of Covenant activity.
- **Individuals and trusted connectors play a central role in sustaining collaboration,** with continuity of key people often enabling trust, communication and momentum, although over-reliance on individuals can create vulnerabilities when roles change or institutional memory is lost.
- **Capacity and resourcing influence the scale of activity,** with Covenant work often relying on officer time within councils and voluntary contributions from faith communities rather than dedicated funding, meaning that commitment and practical support are as important as financial resources.
- **Local context, geography and participation patterns shape how the Covenant operates,** with factors such as large geographic areas, travel distances, community identity and political engagement affecting how easily partners can meet, coordinate and maintain sustained collaboration.

People, continuity, and institutional memory

Across the interviews there was strong agreement that the effectiveness of the Covenant depends heavily on the individuals involved in maintaining relationships between sectors. In many areas, a relatively small number of people act as connectors or conveners between faith communities and statutory bodies. These individuals often play an important role in sustaining dialogue, organising meetings and ensuring



that collaborative activity continues over time.

Continuity of these relationships was frequently identified as a key factor in maintaining momentum with 53% of respondents feeling that this was either very or extremely significant. One local authority interviewee reflected that *"it helps because the same personalities have been there all the way through… they've built that relationship over time, and that's what allows things to happen quickly."* In areas where the same individuals had been involved in Covenant activity over a number of years, interviewees often described a higher level of trust and a clearer understanding of how partnership working should operate in practice.

> …very few of the people I worked with during that period are still around. And that's where it becomes difficult, because there's no institutional memory of it.

> you know who the go-to person is in the council … It means things don't just sit in a general inbox.

Several faith sector participants also emphasised the value of having clearly identifiable points of contact within local authorities. As one interviewee explained, *"you know who the go-to person is in the council, and if you don't, you can go through named contacts. It means things don't just sit in a general inbox."* This kind of clarity was viewed as helping partners navigate organisational structures and ensuring that communication between sectors remains effective with the implicit assumption here being that not having a named individual can be a barrier.

At the same time, the reliance on individuals also creates potential vulnerabilities. In some areas, the departure of key figures has resulted in a loss of momentum or institutional memory around Covenant activity. One faith-sector participant noted that *"very few of the people I worked with during*

Mainstreaming multi-faith learning in schools

What happened?

In one city that has recently signed the Covenant, faith leaders identified education as a priority area for the local Faith Covenant. A subgroup of faith representatives began working with the city's Director of Education and headteachers to broaden how faith is represented in schools. Previously, some schools relied on a single Christian representative to lead assemblies. Through the Covenant network, this was expanded so that leaders from different traditions, including Muslim representatives, were invited to contribute. Faith groups also began developing shared learning materials and *"faith boxes"* for use in classrooms and offered opportunities for school visits to places of worship.

So what?

The initiative helped bring multi-faith understanding into everyday school life. Headteachers were able to draw on local faith leaders as a resource, enabling assemblies, learning materials and visits to reflect the diversity of the community. Here, the Covenant enabled faith representatives to speak directly with schools and pupil councils about *"the faith voice and understanding."*

Now what?

The work continues through collaboration between the education service, headteachers and the Faith Covenant network. Faith groups remain involved in developing resources, visiting schools and hosting visits to their own buildings. This approach embeds multi-faith learning within existing education structures while strengthening relationships between schools, local authorities and faith communities.



...relationships between faith communities are sometimes shaped by wider national or international developments which can influence local dynamics.

that period are still around. And that's where it becomes difficult, because there's no institutional memory of it." Another example described how a neighbouring area had previously maintained a successful interfaith forum, but following a restructuring within the local diocese and the departure of a key leader, the forum gradually ceased to operate.

These examples highlight both the strengths and risks associated with relationship-driven partnership models. While trusted connectors can enable collaboration to develop quickly, over-reliance on individuals may limit resilience if roles change or leadership transitions occur.[5] In some cases, embedding Covenant activity within existing structures has helped maintain continuity, although this can also reinforce existing networks and may limit opportunities to broaden participation beyond established actors.

Having these potential points of failure in people and continuity also highlights the importance of mainstreaming behaviours and practices expected by the Covenant into wider local authority and county council strategies and plans. Here there is scope for systems change to take place and be maintained beyond the continued involvement of key people.

Lastly, while strong relationships between individuals can enable collaboration to develop quickly, they can also expose Covenant activity to risks that sit beyond the control of local governance structures. Interviewees noted that relationships between faith communities are sometimes shaped by wider national or international developments which can influence local dynamics. One survey respondent highlighted the challenge of *"healing the damage done by the war in Gaza to Muslim–Jewish relations,"* illustrating how geopolitical events can affect trust and cooperation between communities at a local level.

...points of failure in people and continuity also highlights the importance of mainstreaming behaviours and practices expected by the Covenant into wider local authority and county council strategies and plans.

5 Range, D. (2025). 'Understanding and harnessing trust in faith spaces to address structural inequalities', *International Journal of Civilizations Studies & Tolerance Sciences*, 2(2), pp. 62–77. Available at: emiratesscholar.com/directory/index.php/ijcsts/article/view/1150. Accessed on 17th April 2026.

In such circumstances, the Covenant can at its best provide an important framework through which dialogue can be maintained. However, it cannot fully insulate local partnerships from tensions that arise from wider political or global developments. There are examples of such tensions between groups and individuals being perceived as issues related to Faith Covenant and the Covenant has, in effect, been used as a lightning rod. This undermines the ability of the Covenant to function effectively in areas where this happens.

Capacity and resourcing

Capacity and resourcing were frequently identified as important factors shaping the extent of Covenant activity across different areas. While the Covenant itself does not provide dedicated funding to signee areas, its implementation often relies on the availability of officer time within local authorities and voluntary contributions from faith organisations. 86% of respondents felt that capacity and resourcing (including staff time) had impacted on the outcomes of the Covenant in their area.

Several interviewees highlighted staffing capacity as a practical constraint on what can be achieved. One participant explained that *"our big challenge is capacity, because our faith communities are so small. We could really do quite a bit more when we had our interfaith worker."* Similarly, another interviewee noted that *"resource in staffing is certainly the barrier… we just don't have the capacity to do it at this moment in time."*

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On the flipside of this, areas that were able, often through ongoing cohesion or integration related roles, to resource the Covenant with dedicated staff time generally saw the benefit of this. This is important because, in practice, much of the coordination associated with the Covenant is undertaken alongside existing responsibilities within councils and community organisations. In many areas, local authorities provide practical support by hosting meetings, providing administrative assistance or allocating officer time to maintain communication between partners. These contributions help sustain Covenant activity even in the absence of dedicated funding.

Interviewees also expressed mixed views about the role of funding in strengthening the Covenant. Some participants felt that additional resources could support initiatives such

as mapping faith-based social action or expanding collaborative projects. Others suggested that focusing too heavily on funding risks narrowing the purpose of the Covenant. One faith-sector survey respondent reflected that strengthening the Covenant might be better achieved by *"intentionally teaching it as a discipleship practice, not just a funding mechanism,"* emphasising values of generosity, service and community engagement rather than financial incentives alone.

The voluntary nature of faith participation also shapes engagement patterns. Many faith leaders involved in Covenant activity contribute their time alongside other responsibilities within their communities, which can limit the frequency with which they are able to participate in meetings or collaborative projects. This report would like to clearly state that the role of resourcing from both councils, in a time of widespread financial constraint, and the faith sector, on a largely voluntary basis, is equally vital, impactful and valued.

These differing perspectives and positionalities highlight that while resources can support activity, the Covenant's effectiveness is not solely dependent on funding. Instead, it relies on a combination of practical support, shared commitment and the willingness of partners to sustain collaboration over time.

...the role of resourcing from both councils, in a time of widespread financial constraint, and the faith sector, on a largely voluntary basis, is equally vital, impactful and valued.

...online meetings can improve accessibility, particularly in rural areas, but may also reduce opportunities for the informal relationship-building...

Scale, geography, and participation

Geography and local context also play an important role in shaping how the Covenant operates. This was not an initial consideration of the research but the importance of these factors was emergent early on as the areas involved vary considerably in size, population density and the diversity of faith communities present. The data suggests that these factors are variables that have influence on both the structure of engagement and the practicalities of bringing partners together.

In large geographic areas, for example, participation can be influenced by travel distances and the distribution of communities. Some areas have responded by rotating meeting locations to enable participation from different communities, while others have made greater use of online meetings to reduce time and cost

...in very large or diverse areas where communities may identify more strongly with local neighbourhoods than with a wider region, maintaining consistent participation can be more challenging.

barriers. Participants noted that online meetings can improve accessibility, particularly in rural areas, but may also reduce opportunities for the informal relationship-building that often takes place during in-person gatherings.

Examples from some of the larger areas in this research, also illustrate how smaller or more geographically dispersed communities can develop strong collaborative relationships effectively overcoming the challenges of geography.

Another important factor identified by interviewees was the role of shared local identity in sustaining collaboration. In areas where partners felt a strong sense of local cohesion or common purpose, it was often easier to maintain regular engagement and collective activity. Conversely, in very large or diverse areas where communities may identify more strongly with local neighbourhoods than with a wider region, maintaining consistent participation can be more challenging.

Linked to this too is the need in some areas for political buy-in at elected member and MP level. This was often taken for granted in smaller local authority areas that generally had one elected member responsible for Covenant and related activities and only a small number of MPs involved too. Where larger numbers of elected portfolios and officials were involved, or where overall responsibility was not clear, activity could stall or become more cumbersome.



In areas where partners felt a strong sense of local cohesion or common purpose, it was often easier to maintain regular engagement and collective activity.

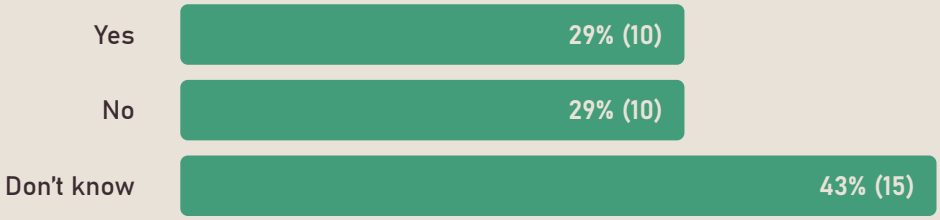
4. Embedding the Faith Covenant in policy and systems

The long-term impact of the Faith Covenant is closely linked to the extent to which its principles and commitments become embedded within local systems and organisational practice. While much Covenant activity is driven by relationships between individuals, several interviewees emphasised that the most durable outcomes occur when the Covenant becomes integrated into wider policy frameworks, governance arrangements and routine ways of working within local authorities and partner organisations.

Survey data shows widespread perceptions of positive work and tangible examples of impact; yet, there is a low awareness of organisations changing their behaviours, policies and/or practices as a result of their local Covenant. Only 29% could point to this happening with the largest cohort of respondents being unaware of systemic change.

In accordance with systems change literature, the Covenant would be most effective if it moves beyond the immediate actors involved in its delivery and begins to influence how institutions themselves operate.[6] In these circumstances, the Covenant is less dependent on individual champions and is more likely to sustain momentum over time. This section explores how this embedding has practically taken place and outlines both barriers to it taking place and actions which can be taken to promote it.

Do you believe that the organisations working most closely on the Faith Covenant in your area have changed their behaviours, policies, and/or practices as a result of being a part of it?



6 Meadows, Donella (1999). *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*, Vermont: The Sustainability Institute.

Key findings

- **The long-term impact of the Faith Covenant depends on the extent to which it becomes embedded within institutional systems,** moving beyond individual relationships to influence policy frameworks, governance structures and routine organisational practice.
- **Embedding within council structures helps translate the Covenant from commitment to action,** enabling officers and partners to collaborate more confidently and integrate Covenant principles into wider agendas such as cohesion, health and community safety.
- **Where embedding does not occur, the Covenant risks remaining largely symbolic,** particularly where high-profile signing events are not followed by clear governance arrangements, operational coordination or sustained partnership activity.
- **While widely seen as a framework with significant promise, the Covenant's full potential has yet to be realised in many areas,** with stronger guidance, learning between Covenant areas and clearer national signals seen as factors that could support deeper and more consistent embedding.

...the most durable outcomes occur when the Covenant becomes integrated into wider policy frameworks, governance arrangements and routine ways of working...

Embedding in council structures

One of the clearest indicators of the Covenant becoming embedded is when its commitments are incorporated into council structures and decision-making processes more easily. As one local authority interviewee explained, *"because we're signed up to it, it gives that licence for people to get behind projects. It removes that layer of 'do we, don't we'."* In particular, this empowers less senior local authority employees to make decisions quickly and effectively without needing to engage hierarchically.

Embedding often occurs through a combination of practical and organisational factors. These include alignment between Covenant commitments and wider policy priorities, integration with existing partnership forums and the presence of governance structures that provide ongoing oversight. In some cases, the Covenant has also been linked to broader strategic agendas such as community cohesion, health and wellbeing or community safety,

enabling it to influence policy discussions beyond the immediate context of faith engagement. In this way, the Covenant became part of a broader ecosystem of collaboration rather than a standalone initiative.

Interviewees frequently emphasised that signing the Covenant is often the easiest stage of the process. Maintaining momentum and translating commitments into sustained activity can be significantly more challenging. Embedding the Covenant within organisational systems therefore appears to be a key factor in ensuring that the initial momentum created by signing is maintained over time. The research also identified examples where the Covenant had remained largely symbolic rather than becoming embedded within local systems. In these cases, signing ceremonies had generated initial visibility but were not followed by sustained governance structures or ongoing collaborative activity.

Interviewees in one Covenant area described a high-profile signing event that was widely celebrated locally but was not accompanied by a clear implementation plan or ongoing coordination. Interviewees reported that consequently Covenant activity gradually diminished over time, as attention and resources shifted to other priorities *"Obviously you can't just sign it and then do nothing… The Covenant doesn't have a budget… it relies on influence."*

…signing the Covenant is often the easiest stage of the process. Maintaining momentum and translating commitments into sustained activity can be significantly more challenging.

Without mechanisms for maintaining engagement, coordinating activity and embedding commitments within organisational practice, the Covenant risks remaining a statement of intent rather than a driver of sustained collaboration.

Factors that can positively influence embedding

Across the interviews and survey responses there was a recurring view that the Covenant shows significant *"promise"* but that its full potential has not yet been realised in many areas. Participants frequently described the Covenant as having the capacity to support deeper collaboration and influence local systems more strongly where the necessary structures and support are in place. At present, however, the extent to which this happens varies considerably between areas.

Interviewees identified several factors that appear likely to influence the degree to which the Covenant becomes embedded within local systems. These include the availability of practical guidance to support

Embedding the Covenant in a large, diverse city

What was the context?

In one large city with high levels of diversity and deprivation, partners sought to move the Faith Covenant beyond symbolic commitment and embed it within council policy and practice. Local actors wanted the Covenant to influence how the local authority worked with faith communities over the long term.

What happened?

The Covenant was formally approved by the council's executive board, meaning that its commitments became part of council policy. This elevated the Covenant from a partnership agreement to something with institutional backing and so *"the Covenant was approved by the Council's executive board… it also made it formally council policy."*

What was the outcome?

Embedding the Covenant in council structures gave it greater legitimacy and visibility across the organisation. It strengthened collaboration with faith communities and created practical opportunities for joint working. In one example, the council used city centre screens to share faith-related messages and highlight community initiatives.

What was learned and what would you change in the future?

Embedding the Covenant within formal governance structures gave it *"weight"* and helped sustain activity beyond individual relationships. The experience suggests that integrating the Covenant into policy frameworks can help ensure that partnership with faith communities becomes part of routine council practice.

areas developing or implementing a Covenant, opportunities to learn from examples of effective practice elsewhere and access to forums where partners can share experience and reflect on progress. Participants also noted the potential value of clearer strategic framing, including the use of theory of change approaches, the development of a stronger local business case for Covenant activity and greater emphasis on reflecting on and evaluating progress over time.

Participants ... noted the potential value of clearer strategic framing, including the use of theory of change approaches, the development of a stronger local business case for Covenant activity and greater emphasis on reflecting on and evaluating progress over time.

Interviewees also highlighted the potential influence of national political signals in supporting the longer-term embedding of the Covenant. One participant referred to a letter sent to UK faith leaders in June 2024 by the Leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, which recognised the contribution of faith communities and expressed support for promoting local Faith Covenants as a mechanism for strengthening collaboration between local authorities and faith groups. However, this interviewee also expressed frustration that the letter had not, at the time of the research, been followed by further visible policy development or practical action. They suggested that clearer national engagement of this kind could help reinforce the importance of the Covenant locally, providing additional legitimacy and momentum for areas seeking to embed it within council structures and wider partnership working.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that while the Covenant is widely viewed as a positive and constructive framework, its long-term impact depends on the extent to which it becomes embedded within wider systems of governance and partnership working. Where this occurs, the Covenant does move beyond symbolic commitment and contribute more consistently to sustained collaboration between faith communities and statutory partners.

Future opportunities for embedding the Covenant

Recent national policy developments point to emerging opportunities to further embed the Faith Covenant within local governance and partnership structures.

Protecting What Matters strategy

The government's social cohesion strategy, *Protecting What Matters*, as of March 2026 places renewed emphasis on strengthening community cohesion, countering division and building resilient local communities through closer collaboration between

government, civil society and faith groups.[7] The strategy highlights the role of local partnerships in responding to tensions, supporting integration and protecting communities from extremism and hate, recognising that cohesion is a key component of wider societal resilience. Research data and participants suggest that this framing aligns closely with the existing outcomes associated with the Covenant, particularly its demonstrated value during moments of crisis response, where established relationships between faith groups, community organisations and the local authority enabled rapid coordination, communication and support to residents.

Local government reorganisation

Alongside this, the ongoing programme of local government reorganisation may present a further opportunity to strengthen and institutionalise the Covenant. Structural change inevitably creates disruption, but it can also provide a 'clean slate' in which partnership approaches and community engagement mechanisms are reconsidered and redesigned. An interviewee noted that this moment could provide renewed impetus to embed the Covenant more formally within emerging governance arrangements, ensuring that faith and community partners are recognised as part of the borough's civic infrastructure for cohesion and resilience.

> ...this moment could provide renewed impetus to embed the Covenant more formally ... ensuring that faith and community partners are recognised as part of ... civic infrastructure for cohesion and resilience.

At the same time, as highlighted elsewhere in this report, care will be required to ensure that any new structures remain attentive to questions of place, identity and geography. Existing local networks have been central to the Covenant's effectiveness, and there is a risk that reorganisation could disrupt these if changes to boundaries or structures are not handled carefully. This is particularly important given that faith communities and networks do not necessarily operate within administrative boundaries, and the success of the Covenant to date has partly rested on its ability to reflect the lived realities of communities whose identities and relationships do not neatly align with local authority borders.

The Civil Society Covenant

Lastly, the emergence of the Civil Society Covenant presents a clear opportunity to strengthen and

7 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2026) *Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive and resilient United Kingdom.* Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom. Accessed on 16th April 2026.

extend the principles underpinning the Faith Covenant. Its emphasis on early engagement, co-production and reciprocal partnership[8] aligns closely with existing practice in areas where the Faith Covenant is already being used as a working framework. In one area, for example, officers are actively exploring how the two approaches can be brought together into a single covenant covering both faith and wider civil society partners. This reflects a pragmatic response to limited capacity, seeking to *"work smarter"* by aligning overlapping principles and reducing duplication in engagement activity. There is potential here for the Civil Society Covenant to provide additional structure, visibility and external accountability, helping to embed partnership working more consistently across systems while reinforcing the expectations already set out in the Faith Covenant.

> ...the success of the Covenant to date has partly rested on its ability to reflect the lived realities of communities whose identities and relationships do not neatly align with local authority borders.

However, there are also risks that require careful consideration. Combining or aligning covenants may dilute the distinct focus of the Faith Covenant, particularly where faith engagement becomes one element within a broader civil society offer. Interview data highlights that, in some areas, the Covenant is already difficult to sustain as a live, proactive framework due to resource constraints and competing priorities. There is a risk that further integration could weaken rather than strengthen its application if not clearly defined and resourced.

> Combining or aligning covenants may dilute the distinct focus of the Faith Covenant, particularly where faith engagement becomes one element within a broader civil society offer.

More fundamentally, the faith sector operates in ways that are not always interchangeable with wider civil society. Faith organisations often draw on significant volunteer capacity, established leadership structures and deep rooted, hyper local networks that enable rapid mobilisation and trusted access to communities. The continued value of the Faith Covenant therefore lies in recognising and leveraging these distinct characteristics, ensuring that any alignment with the Civil Society Covenant enhances rather than obscures the specific contribution that faith-based partners can make to cohesion, resilience and local service delivery.

8 Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2025). *Civil Society Covenant*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-society-covenant/civil-society-covenant. Accessed on 16th April 2026.

CONCLUSION



This evaluation finds that the Faith Covenant plays a meaningful and constructive role in strengthening relationships between faith communities and statutory partners. In many of the areas in which it operates, it was generally viewed positively by statutory and faith sectors with many feeling that the Covenant has been a success in their area and increased collaboration between the parties involved. Over the last 10 years, the Faith Covenant has improved collaboration between local authorities and the faith sector.

However, this research also highlights that there is no single or universal experience of the Faith Covenant. Its operation and contribution varies significantly depending on local context. This is true regardless of the scale of the area covered, levels of ethnic and religious diversity, population density and whether the setting is urban, rural or coastal. As a result, the Covenant should be understood as a flexible framework which manifests differently across places rather than as a uniform model of partnership.

Where it functions best, the Covenant provides a framework that supports trust, collaboration and practical joint working: it has helped to formalise relationships that previously existed informally between faith groups and statutory bodies, giving these relationships greater structure, legitimacy and visibility. This has strengthened communication between partners and created clearer channels through which faith organisations and local authorities can engage with one another. In some cases, the Covenant has also supported more coordinated local responses during local or national crises, demonstrating effectiveness and value for money.

...the Covenant should be understood as a flexible framework ... rather than as a uniform model of partnership.

The Covenant appears particularly effective when it builds on existing relationships – it seems better at reinforcing and strengthening collaboration than initiating it from scratch. Continuity of key individuals – both within faith communities and local authorities – also appears to be an important factor in sustaining momentum. Where these relationships are supported by regular meetings, governance arrangements and ongoing dialogue between partners, the Covenant moves beyond a symbolic commitment and becomes a practical mechanism for partnership working.

At the same time, the evidence suggests that the Covenant is not in itself a driver of change. Its effectiveness is closely tied to the local structures and resources that sit around it. In areas where relationships between faith groups and statutory bodies are weaker or less developed, the Covenant has acted as a starting point for trust building and collaboration, but this process takes time, requires sustained

engagement and a clear sense of joint purpose. Here, the contribution of the Covenant, at these stages of their lifecycle, is formative to the development of relationships, more so than generating activities or outcomes.

There are also clear constraints which shape how far the Covenant can operate in practice. Capacity and staffing resources were identified across many areas as significant limiting factors. Where responsibility for maintaining the Covenant is unclear, or where there is insufficient resource to convene partners and sustain engagement, activity can stall and expectations may not be met. In some cases this has resulted in disappointment among stakeholders from both statutory and faith sectors who expected the signing of the Covenant to lead to more visible or immediate outcomes in their area. Even where the Covenant has been viewed positively, there is also often a belief that there is still untapped potential in the model too.

Despite these limitations, the evaluation demonstrates that there is a practical operational and value-for-money case for the Covenant where it is actively supported. Faith organisations often hold trusted relationships within communities that statutory partners may find difficult to reach. When these relationships are effectively connected to local authority structures, the Covenant can help partners work more efficiently, share information more effectively and engage communities in ways that would otherwise require significantly greater time and resources. This is particularly the case around the faith sector's role in responding to local, national and international crises.

Finally, the evaluation highlights the importance of ensuring that the Covenant operates in ways that are inclusive and reflective of the diversity of local faith and community landscapes. While established networks and trusted intermediaries can play a valuable role in facilitating collaboration, there is also a risk that existing structures may reinforce established power dynamics or informal gatekeeping. Maintaining openness, transparency and broad participation is important to sustaining the credibility and long-term value of the Covenant.

...there is ... a belief that there is still untapped potential in the model...

Overall, the evidence suggests that the Faith Covenant provides a constructive framework through which faith communities and statutory partners can strengthen collaboration. When supported by clear governance, sustained engagement and local ownership, it can help create the conditions for trust, dialogue and coordinated local action. Where these supporting conditions are weaker, its impact is more limited and its value shifts towards facilitating the longer-term work of relationship building.

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