**NFCC Religion and Faith Toolkit**

**1. What is this religion, faith and belief toolkit, and how do I use it?**

1.1 The National Fire Chiefs Council is committed to support Fire and Rescue Services to embed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in all that they do.

1.2 This toolkit looks specifically at inclusion from the perspective of religion, faith and belief. It includes information and tips to help make sure everyone in your team and the communities served can feel included.

1.3 We hope it will be a helpful resource for anyone working as part of an inclusive team. We know that faith groups are not homogenous groups, and therefore this guide is a starting point for conversations.

**2. Why do Fire and Rescue Services need a religion, faith and belief toolkit?**

2.1 We recognise the added value that diversity brings to our sector. The better we understand of the needs of the community the better we will be at delivering services that meet those needs. Being reflective in terms of our workforce is probably the most effective way of developing that understanding. It means we need to think more about how we can make everyone feel included in our workplaces.

2.2 Fire and Rescue Service colleagues who practice a particular religion or have a particular set of beliefs, this may include feeling able to share their religion, faith or belief without fear of discrimination.

2.3 This toolkit aims to provide help on what to think through when building an inclusive team which includes people from a range of different religions and belief systems. It’s split into different sections:

* 2.4 what we mean by religion, faith and belief
* 2.5 what does the data tell us about religion, faith and belief in the Fire and Rescue Service
* 2.6 what are our strategic priorities for religion, faith and belief in the National Fire Chiefs Council
* 2.7 our Employee Networks, and how to get in touch
* 2.8 why this matters to you
* 2.9 where you can find out more about religion, faith and belief in the workplace
* 2.10 FAQs

**3. What do we mean by religion, faith and belief?**

3.1 Religion or belief is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. You can find out more [here](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/religion-or-belief-discrimination) about what that means in terms of our commitment to tackling discrimination. Our approach includes.

* 3.2 Support for any Fire and Rescue Service employee of any religion – including an organised religion like Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism, or a smaller religion like Rastafarianism or Paganism, as long as it has a clear structure and belief system.
* 3.3 Support for any Fire and Rescue Service employee who have particular philosophical beliefs. The definition of a belief for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is something that “is genuinely held and more than an opinion. It must be cogent, serious and apply to an important aspect of human life or behaviour”.
* 3.4 Support for Fire and Rescue Service employees with no religion or belief - on the basis that protection against discrimination applies equally to people who are not of a particular religion, or a part of it.

3.5 What this means is that this toolkit is deliberately written in a way that does not prioritise one religion or belief system above others, and that seeks to provide support to all for whom their religion is visible (because of dress or practice, for example) as well as those for whom it is not. It is also written in a way that aims to ensure those who have no religion or formal belief system can also feel fully included in the work of their teams.

3.6 This toolkit does not attempt to offer detailed information on differing religions, but if that would be helpful, let us know. In the meantime, if you would like to find out more information about specific religious festivals these are available [here](https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/religious-festivals).

**4. What does the data tell us about religion, faith and belief in Fire and Rescue Services?**

### 4.1 Many Fire and Rescues Services ask colleagues if they would like to share their religion or belief via their HR systems. This contributes to building a national view of the Sector as a whole.

### 4.2 The home office data is still experimental but are published [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fire-and-rescue-workforce-and-pensions-statistics-england-april-2019-to-march-2020/fire-and-rescue-workforce-and-pensions-statistics-england-april-2019-to-march-2020)

4.3 In 2020, four Fire and Rescue Services did not provide information on religion in the datasets they supplied to the Home Office in 2020, meaning that no data were available for three per cent of staff (this compares with 27% in 2011). A further 35 % of all Fire and Rescue Service staff chose to not state their religion in 2020 (broadly the same percentage as previous years). All of these responses are excluded from the calculations below.

4.4 Figures on religion of Fire and Rescue Services workforce are available from 2011 with firefighters stating their religion as ‘Christian’ accounting for the majority of firefighters: the proportion decreased from a peak of 62 % in 2012 down to 49 % in 2020. These compare with 59 % of England’s resident population in the 2011 Census identifying as ‘Christian’.

4.5 The second largest group of firefighters is those that stated they had “no religion”, generally increasing from a low of 32 % in 2012 to a high of 43 % in 2020. This compares with 25 % of England’s resident population in the 2011 Census.

**5. Amplifying the dialogue about faith and belief in our workplaces?**

5.1 Each Fire and Rescue Service has own approach to Diversity & Inclusion, but there are some consistent themes across the sector. Some thoughts from the National Fire Chiefs Council include:

5.2 Of all the diversity characteristics, faith and belief tends to be the one we talk about least. Many people feel a bit uncomfortable talking about their religion, faith or belief - partly because it’s a private matter, partly because in doing so they might open themselves up to other people’s preconceptions, or have to justify their beliefs in some way. Equally, asking other people about their faith can also feel difficult – questions about faith can risk feeling intrusive, or patronising, or even ignorant.

5.3 But we need to recognise that for lots our people, having a particular faith or belief is a large part of who they are. And although in the current context, discussing a particular faith or belief can feel difficult – and somehow loaded with the connection to global events - for many people, every day at both work and home, faith informs their values and how they operate.

5.4 We are helping to support those conversations through our outreach workstream and encouraging staff networks at a local and national level. Bringing people together to understand what makes each other tick, and through that to develop a shared sense of belonging.

**6. Celebrate the shared values we have, whatever our faith or belief system**

6.1 In addition to promoting dialogue through which we can learn more about different faiths, our work also prioritises events and dialogue that can help us celebrate the common values that lots of us share – no matter what our background, religion or belief system such as [Interfaith Week](https://www.interfaithweek.org/).

**7. Employee Networks**

7.1 The National Fire Chiefs Council is aware of grass roots networks across the sector focusing on religion, faith and belief, whether as part of a cultural network or more specifically faith based. There is also the [UK Fire and Rescue Chaplaincy](https://www.frsca.co.uk/chaplainsassoc) helping the sector with wellbeing from the perspective of faith. Faith and Fire, [AFSA](http://afsa.co.uk/) an inclusive network support and represent the sector in matters of faith and culture.

7.2 We need to make sure that everyone feels that their voice is heard, and that they have a safe space in which they can air any concerns or worries. These networks are a key part of that and we hope to support their development. The work they support include:

* 7.3 Equality Impact Assessments
* 7.4 management issues
* 7.5 wellbeing
* 7.6 policy matters/development
* 7.7 quality assurance
* 7.8 improving relations and confidence, assisting colleagues with related issues and concerns regarding their cultural, religion, faith and belief

**8. Why this matters to you as a line manager**

8.1Behaving inclusively isn’t just about understanding religion faith and belief, and lots of what you already do as a people manager and a leader within the Fire and Rescue Sector will directly benefit those people in your team for whom practicing a particular religion is important.

8.2 So before looking through the details in the FAQs section of this toolkit, it’s worth thinking through what the core components of building inclusive teams are that will help lay the foundation for greater dialogue about faith and belief and the specific needs within your team.

**8.3 For example:**

**8.4 Get to know your team, build trust, and be open to challenge.**

Take steps to understand the barriers that individuals or groups of people can face in participating fully and progressing. Seek out opportunities to mentor, coach, or sponsor staff and take up reverse mentoring to build a better understanding of other people’s perspectives.

**8.5 Be visible and transparent in your commitment to building, embedding and normalising an inclusive culture within your organisation.**

Create ambitious and transparent diversity and inclusion objectives, and encourage a working culture where diversity of thought and working styles, as well as diversity of characteristics, is not only respected but expected.

**8.6 Encourage a culture where people are respectful of others’ needs and feel it is safe to speak up about things that concern them.**

This will only happen where people can genuinely see that when people do come forward they are listened to and treated respectfully. Be prepared to step in and help to resolve concerns and conflict - and where problems do arise, take steps to ensure that all parties feel supported and understand what is happening.

8.7 In essence, this boils down to understanding where members of your team are coming from, understanding their lived experience, and ensuring that they aren’t excluded from your team and from the work you do.

**9. Where you can find out more about faith and belief in the workplace**

**9.1**[**ACAS**](http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1856)

**9.2**[**Equality and Human Rights Commission - Religion and Belief in the workplace**](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/religion-or-belief-workplace)

**9.3**[**The Equality Act 2010**](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents)

**9.4**[**The Inter Faith Network**](https://www.interfaith.org.uk/)

9.5 You can also find out more information here about Inter Faith Week, a nationally recognised annual event that enables greater interaction between people of different faiths and backgrounds, celebrating diversity and encouraging cooperation and inter faith learning.

**9.6 Best practice**

We are gathering a repository of good practice, the list is not exhaustive, please contact us if you have recommendations (CPO)

9.7 [Top Tips for Ramadam](http://109.169.46.147/FileStorage/Documents/187/AFSA%20Ramadan%202021%20-%20Top%20Tips.pdf)

9.8 [Ramadam Booklet](http://109.169.46.147/FileStorage/Documents/183/AFSA%202021%20Ramadan%20Month%20Resource%20Toolkit%20MJ%20(2).pdf)

9.9 [Ramadan Tips for Managers](http://109.169.46.147/FileStorage/Documents/190/AFSA%20Ramadan%202021%20-%20Top%20Tips.pdf)

9.10 [Ministry of Defence guidance on Faith and Belief](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/28127/guide_religion_belief.pdf)

9.11 [AFSA Toolkit for Religion and Belief](http://109.169.46.147/FileStorage/Documents/184/AFSA%202021%20Workforce%20Religion%20and%20Belief%20Toolkit%20Publication.pdf)

**10. FAQs**

10.1 Discrimination or harassment on the basis of religion or belief is absolutely not tolerated, behaviours that make people feel they are being discriminated will be challenged. The legal underpinning is discussed in this helpful [ACAS guide](http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1856).

10.2 There are a range of wider questions about how we can make our workplaces feel inclusive to everyone, no matter what their religion or belief. We have gathered some of them below:

**11.1 Ways of working**

11.1 Creating an inclusive workplace for people of all religions (and none) – what sort of things should I do?

11.2 Faith or belief doesn’t necessarily stop at the door when an individual enters the workplace, it forms part of an individual’s belief system, their values, their greater state of wellbeing – and often their ethics and approach to work.

11.3 The simplest way to find out how individuals in your team feel about whether there are barriers to feeling included in work on the basis of their faith or belief is to talk to them sensitively about their experience. It’s OK to ask, and it’s OK not to know the answer – and if you feel you need more support, there is usually a network in your organisation who can help.

11.4 Things to think about include:

* 11.5 How to visibly respond to and respect an individual’s religion or belief, setting an example for others. For example, acknowledging and planning for festivals and special days when you are talking about work as a team. Or just stopping to think about how the traditions you have in your team might need to be adjusted to make sure everyone can participate.
* 11.6 How best to help your wider team understand where an individual is coming from - with their permission, you might encourage a conversation about the different practices they are undertaking, for example. Or perhaps your local faith and belief networks could come and host a session on customs and practices more broadly?
* 11.7 Involving your wider team in a broader discussion about inclusion that provides a safe space for a conversation about faith and belief, but situates it in the wider context so that no-one feels singled out. How inclusive is your team feeling for everyone? Are there things you could change to make people feel a greater sense of belonging? Is everyone’s voice being heard when it comes to how the team operates?

**12. Where can I find further information about different faiths and beliefs?**

There are lots of resources available, but a good way to start would be to get in touch with one of your organisation’s networks, AFSA or Faith and Fire. You can also find a great calendar of [different religious festivals](https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/religious-festivals).

**13. What should I think about when it comes to social gatherings or outings?**

13.1 Quite often, people worry about whether it’s still OK to have a work Christmas party if someone in the team doesn’t celebrate Christmas - or whether it’s OK to suggest drinks after work. The answer is usually just to think things through based on the preferences of the individuals in your team, and try to offer a range of choices and activities over the year so that no-one feels excluded. Your aim should be to make sure that feeling part of the team doesn’t depend on people taking part in activities they’re not comfortable with.

13.2 So by all means still have a Christmas party, but perhaps think about the venue and bear in mind that not everyone consumes alcohol. Think through the times of day you bring your team together, and whether that will clash with any religious observances. Sometimes it’s helpful in bigger teams to bring a group or committee together to organise things - and if you make sure that’s made up of people from lots of different backgrounds, you usually find they can come up with new ideas for how to make everyone feel included.

**14. Case study**

A restructure of a team offered the opportunity for a team building session that could bring together a diverse mix of people. The team decided not to meet after the session for drinks, as not everyone wanted to go to the pub and some people had childcare commitments to get home to. So they stopped at lunchtime instead, and asked everyone to bring along food and drink that represented them and their culture. The conversation about home-made samosas and Cornish pasties gave the team a safe way of talking about their backgrounds and families, and started to build a greater sense of understanding.

**15. Should my team celebrate all religious festivals?**

Not necessarily! But experience in other teams suggest that actually using other festivals as a good excuse to get together, share experiences and share stories is another way of making everyone in the team feel included – and that their experience counts and matters to others.

**16. Practical issues**

**16.1 Do I need to provide a quiet room or multi faith room?**

Yes – where possible, it is recognised that many buildings can have the right facilities for some ablutions and observances, it should be the desire of all new buildings for the sector, with a commitment where possible to include this with a Fire and Rescue Services estate.

16.2 As good practice we would recommend that Fire and Rescue Services provide information about the location of their quiet/multi faith room in their induction pack, and provide the information on the facilities page of their intranet site. It’s also important to make sure that the room is protected for its intended use - when space is tight, multi faith rooms can end up being used for meetings or for storage, this should be avoided.

**17. What about providing food for meetings?**

17.1 If you’re organising a meeting or event, and you’re providing food, you need to make sure you’re providing a range of options to cater for people who follow specific diets. The easiest thing to do is to first establish the requirements of the people coming (through a quick and easy email RSVP), and then speak to whoever is providing your food to see if they can offer halal, kosher, vegan and other specific options.

17.2 It’s quite common for caterers to be able to provide halal foods (typically vegetarian), but not to be able to provide kosher food. Check suppliers are on your framework, In respect of Kosher meals the licensing authority of “Kedassia” is the most stringent religious organisation in this country and accepted worldwide.

**18. Case study**

A large conference was being organised. The team had budget to cater the conference and in order to ensure that staff who had food allergies or religious requirements could find things they were able to eat, they asked on the event invite if attendees had any specific dietary requirements. A request came in for a kosher meal to be provided. The team made contact with a local Jewish network to check the best provider to get the meal from ahead of time. By doing this they were able to efficiently cater for the individuals’ needs, and for all attendees equally.

**19. Religious dress?**

Individual Services are responsible for their own policies on dress codes to meet their differing business contexts, health and safety regulations and requirements. We recommend that Fire and Rescue services do not prevent employees who choose to wear crosses, head coverings or other symbols of their religion unless it directly interferes with their ability to carry out their duties.

**20. Annual leave and attendance**

**20.1 How should I respond to requests for time off on religious grounds?**

20.2 There is no legal obligation to grant time off for religious reasons - but given we all want to be committed to being inclusive employers, our hope is that Services across the sector will build into their annual leave and flexible working policies consideration of such requests recognising:

* 20.3 It’s important to be able to balance the needs of individuals against the needs of the business. Just as it’s good practice to work across the team to make sure that everyone’s holidays in the summer are timed to ensure that there remains a level of cover throughout, so we need to balance religious leave across the team where appropriate.
* 20.4 It’s important not to overly favour one particular group to the disadvantage of those with different or no religious beliefs. Being very clear in communications around everyone’s leave and attendance (through a shared tracker, for example) is often a helpful way of ensuring transparency.

**21. Where can I find a list of religious holidays in the UK?**

It is useful to have knowledge of the different religious holidays and festivals that people of different faith backgrounds may observe. A good list to refer to can be found on the [Inter Faith network website](https://www.interfaith.org.uk/resources/religious-festivals). Note that some festivals depend on the lunar calendar and so can’t always be predicted in detail – but keeping open communication going can help plan for those.

**22. Are there any specific considerations around bereavement for individuals from different backgrounds?**

Mourning and funeral arrangements can differ between different religions and practices. Members of your team who have suffered a bereavement might need additional time off, or time off with immediate effect to observe specific customs. As with all compassionate leave, you should respond sensitively and sympathetically up front, and then make a judgement as to what is reasonable over time.

**23. What about time off during the working day, for prayer time for example?**

Some religions require prayer at specific times of day, for other individuals it’s important to have space for reflection more informally. Working inclusively means understanding what each individual in your team needs, and finding a way to support that. Even in teams that work on a shift pattern basis, you should help carve out time for individuals to undertake their religious observances wherever possible.

**24. Navigating conflicts and concerns**

**24.1 Is it OK to shake people’s hands?**

Different cultures and religions have different modesty values – some people might want to avoid eye or skin contact with the opposite sex, for example. Even if it initially feels awkward, it’s worth asking sensitively what people prefer – or you might want to hold back and let the individual in your team take the lead on what feels right to them. The Civil Service have done a great blog on this topic [here](https://faststream.blog.gov.uk/2019/01/24/diversity-and-inclusion-icanbeme/).

**24.2 What if I’m worried that people in my team will try to convert others to their beliefs?**

One of the concerns often expressed is that if people bring their religious affiliation to work, there’s a risk that they will seek to coerce others to change their beliefs - instances of this are very rare. For many people, their faith or belief plays a large role in their identity, so it’s only natural that it should come up in conversation.

24.3 Whilst we should be open about the fact that talking about faith and belief can make some people feel uncomfortable. Sharing information about ourselves and our way of life does not always mean we are trying to persuade others to change their beliefs, or that we are judging one set of beliefs to be better than another. It is often about finding a shared understanding as members of the same workplace or team and ensuring that everyone can feel included on that basis.

24.4 What that means in practice is that if a staff member shares a particular belief with a colleague, or invites them to a talk or event and the colleague makes it clear that they are not interested, then their wish should be respected.

24.5 Beliefs should not be raised in an inappropriate context (for example, it is likely to be more appropriate to discuss some issues over coffee rather than in a business meeting, and extra care should be taken around conversations within a hierarchical relationship). It may also be inappropriate to share beliefs in the workplace that are likely to be controversial, and extra caution should therefore be exercised.

24.6 Line managers should be aware that an employee who ‘forces’ their religion or belief on other staff, when they do not want to hear the views, may be harassing them. Workplace harassment policies provide protection for staff that feel that unwanted behaviour has gone too far, and staff should seek to use the existing channels within their Departments for raising concerns.

**25. What guidance should be followed when looking to invite an external speaker into my organisation?**

Inviting an external speaker to discuss their faith or belief can be a great opportunity to share learning and enrich understanding – and in the vast majority of cases is a great way to promote dialogue. It can also be useful to get a panel together with people from a number of religions to discuss the similarities and differences in their experience.

25.1 When inviting a speaker you may wish to consider carrying out the following research before agreeing to host:

25.2 Seek to clarify what will and won’t be discussed – and consider whether this is appropriate specifically for a talk or event happening in the workplace.

25.3 Check that the individual has not used inflammatory language in public statements, nor could reasonably be seen to be promoting hatred towards different groups.

25.4 Think through any risks to your organisation’s reputation if you invite a specific individual or organisation to speak. If a staff member objects to a speaker then this should not automatically be taken as grounds to bar the speaker or organisation. The facts of the case should be investigated to see if the concerns raised are proportionate and well-founded.

25.5 If a decision is taken that a speaker or event is not suitable, there should be full transparency in the decision-making process and fair-handed treatment of all parties involved - and it’s also good practice to use that decision to set guidelines for how things will be arbitrated in the future.

**26. What if someone in my team wants to do something that clashes with someone else’s needs?**

Unfortunately, there’s often not a right or straightforward answer when trying to navigate through the different needs of your team. It’s a question of balance and judgement, but accommodating one set of needs should not come at the expense of others.

**27. How should I respond if individuals from particular faith backgrounds in my team object to gender-neutral toilets?**

27.1 The objective is to achieve dignity and respect for everyone. It is vital to ensure that there are adequate facilities provided. Where it is possible to do so, such as within new builds or estate modifications facilities that are not sexed for single use should aim to be provided. It is realised that this is not always possible and Fire and Rescue services should understand the limitations to alternative options.

27.2 Sex segregated or unisex facilities can be exclusive to those who do not identify within the sex binary of male or female. Gender, referring to a person’s sense of self is a much broader spectrum and facilities that are not bound by the binary may be more inclusive to some.

27.3 Some organisations have overcome such issues by offering a range of facilities. If providing gender-neutral facilities these should be made available in addition to accessible facilities and single-gender (i.e. men's and women's) facilities across the estate. Your estates team may be able to support you on this matter.

**28. What if I’m asked something I don’t know if I should be supporting?**

28.1 If you are line managing a member of staff with a particular faith or belief, understanding their experience and accommodating their particular needs shows good management and helps ensure people perform to the best of their abilities. However, if you are asked a question that you are unsure of the correct response for, do seek advice from your employee networks, local Diversity and Inclusion representatives, the national networks mentioned or organisations such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

28.2 What about religion and belief in the way Fire and Rescue Services carry out their processes and practice?

28.3 As explained religion and belief (including of none) are protected under the Equality Act, 2010. It is important that the decisions Fire and Rescue services make are fully equality impact accessed as this often highlights where inequalities may be mitigated or removed and opportunities to foster good relations and advance opportunity may occur.

28.4 There are some circumstances when being treated differently due to religion or belief is lawful, for example:

* 28.5 a prison chaplain serving Methodist prisoners, or a teacher in faith school may need to be a member of that faith, because the nature or context of the work demands it, this would be considered an occupational requirement.
* 28.5 positive action to encourage or develop a group of people with a religion or belief that is under-represented or disadvantaged in a role or activity
* 28.6 [Religion or belief organisations can, in certain circumstances, discriminate because of some protected characteristics in the way they operate.](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/exceptions-charities-and-religion-or-belief-organisations) This can impact areas of the organisation such as Procurement as the organisation may lawfully restrict or refuse:
  + 28.7 membership of the organisation
  + 28.8 participation in its activities
  + 28.9 the use of any goods, facilities or services that it provides, and
  + 28.10 the use of its premises
  + 28.11 because of a person’s religion or belief or their sexual orientation.

28.12 However These exceptions do not apply to an organisation whose sole or main purpose is commercial, where the services or premises and so on are normally provided for payment, eg the trading arm of a religious organisation.

28.13 Furthermore when a religion or belief organisation contracts with a public body to carry out an activity on that body’s behalf, the organisation cannot discriminate because of sexual orientation in relation to that activity. For example:

* + 28.14 A religious group has a contract with a local authority to provide day care for children. The group cannot refuse to accept a child of a gay couple.