



# Northampton Faith Communities Profile and Places of Worship Audit & Needs Assessment

## **Executive Summary**

Final report to Northampton Borough Council

# Executive Summary

## Purpose and approach

Northampton's faith communities play an important and distinctive role in the life of the Borough. They play a major role in the voluntary and community sector, and are crucial in the provision of local and neighbourhood services, often in areas of long-term disadvantage. For some time now, different groups have been approaching the Council searching for sites and premises for new or expanded places of worship. Due to the highly built up nature of the Borough, and constraints such as competing development needs and land costs, it has not always proved easy to provide such groups with an appropriate long-term and sustainable solution to their accommodation needs. The Council recognises the needs of the Borough's faith communities and would like to see the cultural diversity of its residents contributing to the well-being and cohesiveness of all communities.

This study was commissioned by Northampton Borough Council and the Northampton Inter Faith Forum (NIFF) to allow the Council to plan for future development needs more effectively through gaining a better understanding of the Borough's faith communities, their current facilities and their current and future needs. In addition, the study has provided the Council's Community Engagement team with additional information and links to facilitate ongoing engagement with faith groups. This will help to inform the evolution of the Borough's Sustainable Community Strategy.

The study was overseen by a steering group comprising officers from the Council's Planning Department and Community Engagement team, and a representative from the Northampton Inter Faith Forum. The methodology comprised five stages:

1. A review of secondary data sources on the composition of faith communities, including Census data from 2001 and 2011.
2. A review of planning policy to understand the current policy framework for the development of faith facilities and a review of local planning application data to provide evidence of demand for different types of facilities and issues relating to securing planning permission for faith facilities.
3. A review of secondary data on existing or planned faith facilities and groups in Northampton, for use in the engagement process and primary data collection.
4. Engagement and primary data collection with representatives of faith groups, including a scoping workshop, face-to-face and telephone interviews and an online survey.

5. Analysis and reporting, including GIS mapping of faith communities/facilities and a 'testing' workshop with representatives of faith groups.

## Planning context

The spatial strategy for future growth and development in Northampton is set out in the West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy, which was going through Examination in Public at the time of writing this report. The strategy includes maximising the use of land and buildings within the existing urban areas of the towns as well as developing new sustainable urban extensions (SUEs) to the towns.

There is currently no Borough-wide policy to specifically guide decision-making on places of worship although there are more general policies on community regeneration and meeting community needs in the emerging Joint Core Strategy. This includes policies requiring new residential and commercial development to make provision for community facilities and seeking financial contributions towards the provision or enhancement of existing community facilities through new development, as well as seeking to protect the loss of existing community facilities. In addition, the Central Area Action Plan (CAAP) for Northampton includes some provision for community uses and infrastructure provision and has a policy which seeks to develop Upper Mounts / Great Russell Street in order *'to deliver a mixed use scheme to include some or all of the following uses: residential, office / small scale employment, community (including religious facilities), leisure, educational and small scale retailing'*. These policies are supported by a Planning Obligations Strategy which sets out the terms for where a developer is required to provide a new community centre.

The Council have recently started preparing the Northampton Related Development Area Local Development Plan, which will set out any specific allocations for the Northampton Related Development Area (NRDA) and will include policies against which Planning Applications will be considered.

This Local Plan is being prepared in the context of new national planning policy. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is underpinned by 12 core planning principles; one of which is to *'take account of and support local strategies to improve health, social and cultural wellbeing for all, and deliver sufficient community and cultural facilities and services to meet local needs'*. It requires planning authorities to *plan positively for the provision and use of shared space, community facilities (such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, cultural buildings, public houses, and places of worship) and... guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services.*

The NPPF requires Local Plans to be based on up-to-date evidence and is clear about the need for proactive engagement with the community in the development of evidence and policy and in the decision-making process. This study will help to ensure that the Council's Local Plan meets such requirements in relation to faith facilities and will help

to facilitate ongoing engagement with faith groups during the preparation and implementation of the Local Plan and other local planning policy.

## Religious groups

### Demographic change

The demography of Northampton has undergone significant change in recent years. According to Census data, there has been a substantial increase in the number of people from Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. The African population has more than quadrupled in size. The percentage of those in mixed/multiple ethnic groups has grown significantly, as has the percentage of those in the Indian and Bangladeshi ethnic groups. The size of the Pakistani group has almost doubled.

This changing demography, alongside other factors, is leading to a changing composition of religious groups and a changing demand for faith facilities. In terms of the broad religious groupings, the Census suggests that despite falling numbers, Christianity remains the largest religion in Northampton in 2011. Muslims are the next biggest religious group and their numbers have more than doubled since 2001. There has also been growth in the numbers of Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs. However, underneath these broad statistics, the patterns of growth and decline are complex.

### Christian

Some of the 23 Church of England parishes in Northampton have seen growth, but others have steady or slightly declining numbers. There is particular growth in Roman Catholic and African Pentecostal churches, which appears to reflect demographic change (e.g. the growing population of Catholics originating in Central and Eastern Europe, and the increase in population born in Africa).

The vast majority of Christian groups who participated in this study meet in purpose-built religious buildings. However, there is a clear distinction between the established 'mainstream' churches (Church of England, Catholic, Baptist, URC, Methodist etc) and the newer Christian churches. It is these newer Christian churches, particularly African-led Pentecostal churches and newer Evangelical churches, who tend to be meeting in other types of buildings. Community centres, schools, an old factory, a business centre and a pub are all being used by these groups. Many of these groups report a need for additional space or facilities.

The scoping workshop and some of the survey responses highlighted the fact that churches are getting involved in an increasingly diverse range of activities, which is contributing to the demand for new and/or different facilities.

### Muslim

According to the Census, the Muslim community has more than doubled in size since 2001, reaching almost 9,000 in 2011. The Muslim community is primarily Sunni, and is



organised on national and ethnic lines. Bangladeshi Muslims are the largest group. There are also large numbers of Somali and Pakistani Muslims. There has been particularly strong growth in the number of Somali Muslims over the last 10 years. There is a strong and growing geographic concentration in the Muslim community in a wedge running north west from the town centre. Any provision of new facilities may, therefore, be best located in this area.

We understand that there are six existing mosques in Northampton, a further mosque is currently being established and another Muslim group is currently meeting in a member's house and is looking for a building. In addition, the Northampton Bangladeshi Association operate a community centre, the NBA Gateway Resource Centre, a purpose-built community centre which is open to the whole community and used by a wide range of Muslim and non-Muslim groups. None of the existing mosques are purpose-built and they are of varying size.

Discussions have taken place in the town over a number of years about the development of a purpose-built mosque. No firm proposals are currently being taken forward but a new purpose-built mosque could help to address capacity issues, particularly for key events in the Islamic calendar, and to provide additional needed facilities, such as facilities for the ritual washing of the deceased (currently available in only one of the existing mosques).

## **Hindu**

According to the Census, the Hindu community of Northampton has grown by 52.3% since 2001, reaching 3,393 in 2011. There is a strong geographic concentration of the Hindu community in the east of the town. Any provision of new facilities may, therefore, be best located in this area.

The Hindu groups currently hire space in a range of different buildings, including community centres and schools. Planning permission has recently been granted for the development of a purpose-built facility, the £12 million Northampton Kutumbh (meaning 'wider family') Centre, near Lings Wood, Lumbertubs. It is hoped that construction will start in 2014, although the funding for the scheme has not yet been secured and the community has expressed an urgent interim need for a more suitable place of worship, as well as administration facilities.

## **Sikh**

The Sikh population is small but has grown by 55% since 2001, reaching 2,765 in 2011. Regular Friday services are held in the two Sikh Gurdwaras, as well as cultural activities and larger celebrations for holy days.

There are two Sikh Gurdwaras in Northampton, including one which has been recently converted following the group having outgrown their previous facilities. The other Gurdwara is a converted former large house, with a community centre and youth club, located in a separate building two doors away. However, this group has recently

acquired a two-storey building in a business park, which is to be converted for use as a temple, a community centre and seven classrooms.

### **Buddhist**

The Buddhist community is also small, but has grown by 48% since 2001, reaching 2,194 by 2011. Buddhist groups meet mainly in members' houses, and occasionally visit other centres for larger events. One of the two Buddhist groups in the town is currently seeking alternative hired accommodation.

### **Jewish**

There is a relatively small and declining Jewish population. The Northampton Hebrew Congregation has a synagogue which has a main space capable of accommodating up to 150 people seated and an additional smaller room.

### **Baha'i**

There is a very small but growing Baha'i community. It meets informally in members' homes and other community and religious buildings but has a longer term aspiration for its own centre.

## **Overview of key needs**

There is a substantial demand for new facilities amongst faith groups. Overall, of the groups who answered the question, 48% stated that they needed additional space or facilities. Some of this will not result in additional development activity, since the need can be met by hiring an existing building. Nevertheless, there is likely to be a substantial level of planning and development activity relating to faith facilities in coming years.

Much of this activity is likely to relate to newer Christian groups (particularly those serving growing ethnic groups). The population projections to 2021 suggest that such demand is likely to grow over the next decade, and the lifting of work restrictions in the UK for Bulgarians and Romanians may lead to particular increases in demand amongst Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. There is also an increasing demand for additional worship and community facilities from Muslim groups, although it has not been possible to establish the precise needs of some of the groups.

If the proposals for the Kutumbh Centre progress as planned, the worship and facility needs of the existing Hindu community will be met upon delivery. Until then their needs for worship and administration facilities remain unmet. Groups within the Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh and Baha'i religions appear to be generally well catered for at present. However, the numbers of Buddhists and Sikhs is growing, which may lead to the need for new facilities in future and the Baha'i group in Northampton have openly expressed a desire for a dedicated facility in the longer term.

Most groups who expressed a preference stated that they would prefer their additional space or facilities to be located either in a town centre location or in a residential location. More than 70% stated that there was a particular area of Northampton that they would like their additional space to be located in. This highlights the fact that much of the demand is geographically constrained. It may not be possible to meet this demand through provision of opportunities in alternative locations.

## Meeting needs

The need for additional faith facilities could be met through:

1. Groups hiring bigger or improved facilities. This could play an important role, particularly for growing churches who may be able to hire space from other Christian groups. This may also help to generate income for groups who are struggling with the maintenance liabilities associated with their buildings.
2. The extension of existing faith facilities. A number of groups had plans in place or aspirations to extend their current building, although in a number of cases these are being held up by funding constraints. There may be a role for the Council in working with such groups to identify and access potential sources of funding. Supportive planning policy is also needed, as set out in our recommendations below.
3. The conversion of buildings currently in other uses. Many faith groups are utilising buildings converted from other uses, including homes and commercial premises. Buying an existing building was the most commonly preferred approach of those groups who need additional space or facilities. The most obvious source of existing buildings for conversion are those in the D1 use class which are vacant, but data is needed on vacant D1 provision. Buildings in other uses may also be suitable. Most applications seeking conversion of a non-D1 building to a place of worship have been successful. Nevertheless, given the needs identified in this study, consideration should be given to developing planning policy which encourages conversion for faith use, subject to the necessary parameters.
4. New development in the SUEs. The SUEs may provide limited opportunities to address local need. For example, the Northampton Kings Heath SUE may provide an opportunity to address the current demand in the adjacent Kings Heath. However, since most of the remaining demand is geographically constrained in areas away from the SUEs it is unlikely that they will play a meaningful role in helping to meet current demand for additional facilities. It will be important, however, for the SUEs to incorporate facilities to meet future needs generated by the emergence of new communities within these developments.
5. New development elsewhere. The most common preference among existing groups was for a central location. Locating faith facilities in urban centres is strongly



consistent with the objectives of sustainable development, unless those facilities are meeting a specific local need. This accords both with national and local policy.

The study specifically explored the idea of providing new shared facilities. This is attractive because of the potential to provide for the needs of multiple groups in one development. There may be perceived additional benefits in terms of community cohesion, integration and education. Although some groups suggested that they would be interested in shared use of a new multi-faith facility for acts of worship, strong scepticism was expressed by others. However, there was considerable interest among survey respondents in the idea of using a shared facility for community uses. Given the growing and increasingly diverse range of activities which faith groups are involved in, the need for facilities for community activities is likely to increase in coming years and multi-faith community centres may provide a means of meeting this need.

Where the development of faith facilities requires planning permission, the data suggests that, ultimately, planning is not blocking development. Nevertheless, a number of survey respondents expressed frustration with the operation of the planning system at present. This suggests that there is a need for the planning authority to work more closely with faith groups to enable them to understand and to navigate the planning system, and to ensure that policy and practice is sensitive to the specific needs of these groups.

Given the needs identified in this study and the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), new policy and supporting measures are needed to ensure that new faith facilities are provided. Below we set out our recommendations for how this might be achieved.

## Recommendations

### Planning policy on places of worship

The emergence of the Northampton Related Development Area Local Plan presents an opportunity to address the current deficiency of local planning policy, and the inclusion of a development management policy for places of worship would support and guide decision making on planning applications. Such a policy should address the need for places of worship, taking account of their wider social and cultural roles, and support the retention of existing places of worship, allowing for their extension, adaption or modification when required by current users or to allow for their use by other faith groups, or even shared use. Policy should also allow for the provision of new places of worship to respond to the need identified through this study, with the findings of this report providing an up-to-date evidence base to demonstrate an assessment of need, in line with the requirements of the NPPF.

The wording of any such policy would need to ensure that proposals for places of worship comply with other key policy considerations but it should, however, indicate



that general design policies should be applied flexibility with regards to certain types of places of worship, as some types of facility have specific design requirements that may conflict with other design policies.

In developing policy, it is recommended that consideration is given to the use of locational criteria to help define where places of worship should be located (see case study A in appendix C). Such criteria should include a preference for a central location unless serving a specific local need. Reference could be made in the supporting text to the evidence of need for Muslim facilities to the north west of central Northampton and for Christian facilities in the south east and south west of the town.

### **Supplementary Planning Document**

A key issue that has emerged through consultation with faith groups in Northampton is a frustration with the complexity of planning and a general lack of help and guidance to assist them with the consents process. We therefore recommend that a policy on places of worship should be accompanied by a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), which provides guidance on the policy and development management mechanisms that can be used to meet identified needs for places of worship (see case study B in appendix C). This could take the form of a three part document, as follows:

- Part I: A summary of the types of places of worship that currently exist in the Borough and those that will be required in the future.
- Part II: A 'how to' guide on the planning process for faith groups seeking to obtain planning permission for a place of worship.
- Part III: Detailed guidance on the key planning issues typically associated with places of worship that would need to be addressed as part of a planning application.

### **Complementary Measures**

Planning officers have worked alongside the Community Engagement team and NIFF in steering this study. Ongoing joint working will be essential, alongside the planning measures described above, if the Council is to adopt the proactive and collaborative approach to meeting community needs which is required by the National Planning Policy Framework.

Working in conjunction with the Community Engagement team, planning officers need to maintain ongoing dialogue with faith groups so that the Council continues to build its understanding of faith groups' needs and the constraints within which they are operating. The links with faith groups and the data generated by this study should enable a step change in the Council's engagement with and understanding of faith groups in years to come.

In particular, dialogue should be undertaken with regard to:

- the needs of individual mosques for additional space or facilities;



- the opportunity of providing a purpose-built mosque. Although some consultees report good relations between the Muslim groups at the moment, some consultees are actively involved in developing their own separate facilities. There is no single overarching group that we have identified which could take forward plans for a purpose-built mosque which could serve the wider Muslim community; and
- the opportunity of a multi-faith facility for community uses. The Council should engage in ongoing dialogue with faith groups to identify opportunities for shared facilities to be developed in areas of need, in ways that are sensitive to the specific requirements of the groups involved. Northampton is at an advantage in that it already has a well-established and active inter faith forum (NIFF) and this provides an ideal route for taking forward this opportunity.

Alongside this proactive approach to identifying need and exploring opportunities, we recommend the following measures:

- a directory of available facilities for hire should be developed. Some of the data generated by this study could be used to help populate such a directory;
- the Council do not currently hold data on vacant D1 properties. Consideration should be given as to whether such data can be gathered cost-effectively in order to facilitate the re-use of these buildings by faith groups; and
- funding should be sought to provide training to faith groups (or the wider voluntary and community sector) on engaging with the planning system.