



Political Affairs Digest

A daily summary of political events affecting the Jewish Community

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House of Lords Oral Answers

Religious Groups: Financial Support

Lord McCrea of Magherafelt and Cookstown (DUP): To ask Her Majesty's Government what financial support they have provided to religious groups in the United Kingdom during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Minister of State, Home Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (Lord Greenhalgh): During the pandemic, faith-based organisations and places of worship have been able to apply for a range of government packages available to support charities and businesses. These include the Coronavirus Community Support Fund, Historic England's Covid-19 emergency relief fund and the Local Authority Discretionary Grants Fund. We continue to consider how government can effectively support the sustainability of faith groups.

Lord McCrea of Magherafelt and Cookstown: ... Over these long months of the pandemic, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has provided financial aid for people and businesses greatly impacted by Covid, but churches themselves, which provide vital assistance to the isolated, the elderly, the sick and the dying, have received nothing, although their finances have been greatly depleted by the non-attendance of most of their congregations because of government rules and restrictions. What consideration has been given to this matter, and will aid be forthcoming?

Lord Greenhalgh: I do not recognise that no support has been given. In fact, during the pandemic, there have been 10 schemes available to places of worship, including churches, four of which are still available. I point to the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme from DCMS, the gift aid small donations scheme, the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme through BEIS and the Job Support Scheme from HMT, all of which are still running and available.

Baroness Warsi (Conservative): My Lords, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, in its recent inquiry, received evidence of the specific targeting and blaming of Muslims as a group causing the spread of the coronavirus. Will my noble friend join me in both rejecting this false and bigoted view and paying tribute to the many mosques and community organisations which, despite the Government's decision to allow communal worship in the latest lockdown, have taken the decision to limit services where it is considered wise to do so, in the interests of public health and safety?

Lord Greenhalgh: I join my noble friend in condemning those who point the finger at any community, including British Muslims. I absolutely commend the role taken by Muslim charities, such as the Muslim Charities Forum, in supporting people during the pandemic. It is part of the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Partnership. I commend the work of Muslim charities and mosques in helping the needy and vulnerable at this difficult time.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon (Crossbench): My Lords, Sikhs from the gurdwara in Gravesend were prominent in organising free hot meals for stranded lorry drivers at Dover, and similar initiatives by Sikhs have been applauded in other parts of the world. Government assistance in making minority communities aware of the perils of Covid-19 on media that they read, watch or listen to would be helpful, but does the Minister agree that the faith communities, in the welfare and volunteering they do, are playing a key role in helping us get through the pandemic?

Lord Greenhalgh: My Lords, I completely agree on the role of British Sikhs. It is fundamental to their faith to help people in need, and, although I have only 15 followers, I specifically tweeted out my support for Langar Aid in Kent. It is alongside many charities, including the Salvation Army, which provided much needed sustenance at a very difficult time throughout the Christmas period.

Lord Kennedy of Southwark (Labour Co-op): My Lords, throughout the pandemic, faith groups have provided comfort, care, guidance and support for people and communities—as we saw in Gravesend with the Sikh community. We should pay tribute to them and thank them for that, but, as the noble Lord, Lord McCrea, said, we should go further. Will the Minister agree to speak to his colleagues in the Treasury to see what could be done through the tax system to provide bespoke levels of support to faith communities? I also join the noble Baroness, Lady Warsi, in condemning those who wrongly seek to blame the Muslim community for the pandemic.

Lord Greenhalgh: My Lords, I will always commit to talking to the Treasury. I am not sure it will always listen to me, but I promise to make every endeavour and possible representation to ensure it sees the light and takes up the noble Lord's suggestion.

Lord Roberts of Llandudno (Liberal Democrat): At the end of this pandemic, whenever it is, many ordinary chapels and churches will be in difficulties, just like the major churches. In many places, those that have been closed for the pandemic will not open again. I ask the Government to give support in whatever way possible to those people, sometimes very few, who are battling to come to terms with legal or building requirements. I also thank those who have been standing so faithfully over the years in these smaller congregations. Things have changed now, and I know that in my church, the Methodist Church, the Whitechapel mission, for example, has in the past nine months served 277,000 meals. In other places, as already mentioned, drivers of the lorries held up going to Dover were very well supported by people of all faiths and of no faith. Can we also say thank you to them?

Lord Greenhalgh: My Lords, I declare an interest as the grandson of a Methodist minister, and I commend what Methodists have done, but I am in fact a Roman Catholic. None the less, faith communities have stepped forward and helped considerably during this time, and the Government will continue to think about ways in which we can partner with faith communities.

Lord Flight (Conservative): My Lords, what criteria might the noble Lord propose should apply to qualify for financial support by religious groups?

Lord Greenhalgh: That sounded incredibly technical, to be honest. I need to reflect on it and write back to the noble Lord, giving a comprehensive answer and putting a copy in the Library.

The Lord Bishop of Rochester: I am grateful to the noble Lord, Lord McCrea, as his Question enables me to acknowledge with thanks to the support which has been received by religious groups and charities, not least through the furlough arrangements, which have

been a considerable help for many of them. However, in looking to the future, I join others in urging Her Majesty's Government to keep particularly in mind the needs of smaller charities, which are often religious, community and locally based in character, whose work with young people, the homeless, those in debt, the elderly and other groups has been growing in this time, while their voluntary income has often been diminishing. Perhaps I can tempt the Minister by suggesting that Her Majesty's Government might consider using their new-found freedoms to exchange the current scheme, whereby VAT is reimbursed on works relating to listed places of worship, for one where it is not charged in the first place.

Lord Greenhalgh: My Lords, I know that that will be the start of a series of specific, bespoke requests, but it is right that the Government think about how we support small, grassroots charities. I want to commend the efforts of my colleague, my noble friend Lady Barran, for setting up the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Partnership during the pandemic, which is trying to do precisely that with a £5 million award, and we are looking to build on that for particular faith communities as well.

Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville (Liberal Democrat): My Lords, the second round of the Cultural Recovery Fund will be open for applications from 7 January and will close on 26 January; £36 million of this funding will be allocated to heritage organisations and businesses, administered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Historic England. Will this fund be open to faith organisations that are based in historic buildings, especially in rural areas?

Lord Greenhalgh: My understanding is that DCMS funding is open to places of worship. In fact, a number of places of worship, including many cathedrals, have been in receipt of funding already.

Lord McColl of Dulwich (Conservative): My Lords, many places of worship are open for people of all faiths and of none as places of refuge and renewal, as are organisations such as the Salvation Army, which has already been mentioned. They provide invaluable help to many people, particularly those who have been rescued from abuse of all kinds, such as human trafficking and domestic violence. As their income has been greatly reduced by the Covid pandemic, will the Government help so that their work can continue? Perhaps, as my friendly colleague, the noble Lord, Lord Kennedy, suggested, they can have some form of tax relief.

Lord Greenhalgh: My Lords, I, too, commend the work of the Salvation Army. I now consider Dean Pallant to be a close friend, and the work it does is phenomenal. It is fair to say that it has been able to apply to around 10 schemes, four of which remain open, it is a member of the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergency Partnership, and £5 million has been distributed to its members.

Lord Dholakia (Liberal Democrat): My Lords, I am aware of the valuable work that faith organisations do in our community. Temples, gurdwaras and mosques provide food parcels, and religious leaders provide counselling and other services to local communities. Will the Minister talk to his colleagues in other government departments to ensure that these services are not curtailed by a lack of financial resources? Any help for these organisations through local authorities would be most welcome.

Lord Greenhalgh: My Lords, it is important that we provide joined-up government. I am working closely with my colleagues in DCMS, and we work across Whitehall to ensure that that happens.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-01-06/debates/B3253652-E773-474A-AEEE-84BDA938F406/ReligiousGroupsFinancialSupport>

The call for evidence (now closed) for the APPG inquiry referred to above can be read at <https://appgbritishmuslims.org/evidence/2020/7/2/call-for-evidence-inquiry-on-british-muslim-response-to-covid-19-1>

House of Lords Written Answer

Coronavirus: Religious Buildings

Lord Moylan (Conservative) [HL10001] To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the statement by Lord Greenhalgh on 3 November (HL Deb, col 632), when they will publish the results of Public Health England's research into evidence around places of worship and the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus.

Lord Bethell: Public Health England had not been requested to research and publish detailed specific data on the numbers of COVID-19 cases related to place of worship and allied settings on outbreak investigation. This is now being performed.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-11-04/hl10001>

The statement referred to above can be read at

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2020-11-03/debates/3225ABA8-5630-4FAF-AC61-9A484E93BCE5/Covid-19PlacesOfWorship#contribution-50D88298-2A91-49E7-BD11-C282F23915AF>

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Relevant Legislation ** new or updated today

UK Parliament

Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2622>

Assisted Dying Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2592>

Education (Assemblies) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2579>

Genocide Determination Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2621>

Marriage Act 1949 (Amendment) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2608>

Marriage (Approved Organisations) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2537>

Marriage (Authorised Belief Organisations) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2795>

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

<https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2584>

Scottish Parliament

Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Bill

<https://beta.parliament.scot/bills/domestic-abuse-protection-scotland-bill>

Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bill

<https://beta.parliament.scot/bills/hate-crime-and-public-order-scotland-bill>

Post-mortem Examinations (Defence Time Limit) (Scotland) Bill

<https://beta.parliament.scot/bills/post-mortem-examinations-defence-time-limit-scotland-bill>

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Consultations

** new or updated today

Introduction of a statutory opt-out system for organ donation for Northern Ireland

(closing date 19 February 2021)

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/organ-donation>

Social Distance, Digital Congregation: British Ritual Innovation under COVID-19

(closing date not stated)

<https://bric19.mmu.ac.uk/take-the-survey/>

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The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC029438