



05/05/2020

To

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer
11 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Dear Chancellor,

I hope and pray that you and your family are keeping safe and well during this testing time for all of us. I am writing to you as the Chairman of the Leicester Council of Faiths and at the request of places of worship, including Mandirs, Synagogues, Churches, Gurdwaras, Mosques, Temples and Faith Centres.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on all aspects of our society and economy and we thank you for the measures that you and your colleagues in government have taken to deal with the impact of this on businesses, employers, charities and individuals. However, we are very concerned that the measures that have been announced will not impact positively on the sustainability of the services of places of worship. Places of worship and faith centres are hubs in their communities and quite often (as we are seeing with essential services) are a first port of call for vulnerable and isolated members of society. They play an important part in the moral and spiritual wellbeing of individuals, families and whole communities, and many provide wider activities and manpower (including volunteers) that benefit all members of the public. They also ease the burden on the NHS and local authorities at times of crisis as they step up and support the vulnerable.

Places of worship are often manned by volunteers and rely on donations from congregations to pay for fixed costs, such as clergy salaries, rent, insurance, etc. Of course, some are part of a national organisation and some have adequate reserves which fund their services. During this pandemic, all places of worship have remained closed for public worship but some have continued to allow a minister of religion to attend and conduct a private service and funeral services in accordance with government guidelines. Despite this many have continued to operate on a voluntarily basis to provide moral and spiritual guidance and counselling, guidance on what is allowed or not in lockdown, arrange funerals, deliver food packs, provide talking therapy, provide help with shopping and medicine collection, and crisis support. A big part being played currently is helping people who are depressed or in a mental health crisis with counselling and regular phone support. All this ensures that the burden on the NHS is reduced and there are less episodes of hospital admission to keep the NHS workers safe. Most of this support has been provided by the sheer urge to support vulnerable members of their communities and wider community.

With all the positive action and contribution by places of worship being done at present, funded mainly by their limited reserves and donations from trustees, we are finding that places of worship are now struggling to sustain their activities, especially those that are independent and local. Online and social media donation appeals are not resulting in sufficient donations to meet core costs. Measures announced already by your government also do not benefit places of worship adequately. For example, the Job Retention Scheme requires that furloughed employees cannot work for their employer to be eligible. However, many priests/clergy who are continuing to provide a limited service are still working and are not eligible and thus the places of worship have to continue to pay them.

Business Support Grants providing at least £10,000 for businesses also excludes places of worship because they do not get the small business rate relief and retail relief for them to be eligible. Most get Charitable Relief and some are exempt from paying Business rates due to their inclusion on the Places of Worship register. Also, for some the Business Rates are paid by the Landlords. This creates an unequal platform.

Loan Schemes are not generally accessible to some places of worship, as some have prohibition to take interest-based loans and places of worship, especially the small independent ones, do not have the capacity to put together all the documentation to meet the requirements. Also, some places of worship do not have the powers in their governing documents to take loans.

You have announced a fund to support Charities, which is also welcomed. However, this scheme will exclude places of worship who are providing crucial spiritual and moral support to the vulnerable and families coping with bereavement. This is because the criteria for these funds will exclude the promotion of religion or religious activities from being funded. The same funding restrictions were also in place for emergency local authority support funds. Some places of worship are not registered charities and this may also exclude them from accessing the fund. Additionally, with the Charities fund being administered by the National Lottery Fund, this will automatically exclude some places of worship who have a religious prohibition of dealing with lottery based organisations, even if their essential service would be eligible under the scheme. This means that the places of worship sector, who provides a huge amount of benefit to society, even in these difficult times, will struggle to meet its fixed costs and will not have the same level of support being offered to other sectors. This will greatly impact the sustainability of them, especially those that are independent and entirely rely on income from donations from worshippers who attend services.

The government previously had run a places of worship security fund to provide additional security. We believe that the government should also put in place a places of worship Hardship Fund, or ring fence the funding announced for charities, or consider other support schemes so that the vital spiritual and moral benefit to society is maintained and that they can survive this unprecedented situation. Other examples of this could be increase the amount places of worship receive via Gift Aid and speed up the process of reclaiming so that funds can be received straight away. Also, for some an introduction of an interest-free 100% government backed loan guarantee scheme similar to the one you have announced for small businesses but restrict the amount to maximum of £20,000. We believe that this would prove very popular and could save a lot of smaller charities from going under. Without further support and social distancing being the norm for the foreseeable future (thus reducing congregation numbers drastically), independent places of worship with fixed costs will be unsustainable and likely to cease.

I therefore urge you to consider how places of worship across the country can be supported (especially those that are excluded from the support announced) and provide assurances that they are an equal part of society and that they are entitled to benefit from support extended to all other aspects of society.

I look forward to hearing from you soonest.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fayyaz', written in a cursive style.

Fayyaz Suleman – Chairman

Cc

Faith Places of Worship

Members of Parliament