

CHURCH IN ACTION:

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

Executive Summary

Social action is not an optional side project for the Church; it is core to its heart and mission. The commitment to this calling can be clearly seen in the scale and diversity of activities offered by local churches, ranging from food banks and debt advice, to lunch clubs and fitness classes. Not only do churches offer services that meet specific needs, they also create spaces for people to connect with and get to know others, helping to build stronger and more resilient communities.

Over the last few years, there has been renewed recognition of the vital contribution churches make to our society and to the common good. Their presence within communities enables churches to offer holistic and relational support to people who are struggling with different aspects of poverty: a lack of resources, an absence of strong and supportive relationships and/or a poor sense of self-worth.

This report reveals the scale and nature of Anglican social action in England. It does not capture the extensive and vital work being done by churches of other denominations. In sharing the results of our recent survey, we are able to highlight and celebrate the contribution that churches are already making to their local communities.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 95% of church leaders believe that tackling poverty in their local area is a vital activity for a healthy church – 59% agree strongly, up from 44% in 2011. Furthermore, the proportion of leaders saying this is a fundamental part of the mission of their church has increased from 44% to 53% in the last three years.
- Loneliness is seen as the most significant social problem in local communities – cited by 64% of church leaders – followed by family breakdown, debt, lack of self-esteem and low income.
- 87% of churches support people who are experiencing loneliness, either by providing organised activities (46%) or informal help (41%). On average, churches are addressing seven social issues, and a third are tackling nine or more.
- The scale of church-based social action is impressive: 76% of churches run activities in local schools, 66% help to run food banks, 60% offer parent and toddler groups and 53% organise lunch clubs or drop-ins.
- The number of churches involved in running food banks has doubled in the last three years. A fifth of churches are also involved in helping credit unions in some way, a strong show of support for the Archbishop of Canterbury's initiative.

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METHODOLOGY

This report is a joint research project by Church Urban Fund and the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Team, assisted by their Research and Statistics Division. In September 2014, we sent an online survey to 5,097 incumbents – the most senior members of staff in a parish or group of parishes – of which 1,812 took part, a response rate of 36%. This sample represents a broad sub-section of Church of England parishes. In order to allow comparison over time, we repeated several questions asked in a similar survey conducted in 2011. (For more details on methodology, please see the full report.)

MISSION AND SOCIAL ACTION

The vast majority (95%) of vicars believe that 'engaging with the poor and marginalised in the local area is a vital activity for a healthy church' – 59% agree strongly with this statement, up from 45% in 2011. Despite this very strong support in principle, there are still many church leaders that do not agree that tackling poverty is a 'fundamental part of the mission for our church' – 53% agreed with this statement, up from 44% in 2011.

However, even when church leaders say that tackling poverty is not a fundamental part of their church's mission, these churches are still very active in their communities: over half are addressing five or more social issues in their local area and two-thirds are involved in running food banks.

These responses suggest that people do not necessarily connect the phrase 'tackling poverty' with their church's community work, even if that work is addressing social needs that are strongly associated with poverty, such as unemployment, isolation or poor mental health. Alternatively, churches may not always make a link between the work they do and the wider mission of their church.

RESPONDING TO SOCIAL NEEDS

Loneliness or social isolation is the most commonly cited social issue, with 64% of church leaders reporting it as a major or significant problem in their area, up from 58% in 2011. Around half of vicars also say that family breakdown, debt, lack of self-esteem and low income pose significant problems. These issues are much more prevalent in deprived areas, which accords with the widely accepted view that poverty has an impact on almost every aspect of people's lives, including physical and mental health, family relationships, and social cohesion, as well as material well-being. Social isolation is the one issue that is also seen as significant in most wealthier areas.

Churches are very active in addressing social issues. More than 90% are addressing at least one of the issues listed in Figure 1 through organised activities or informal support. On average, churches are addressing seven issues, and a third are tackling nine or more.

The issues that churches are doing most to respond to are social isolation, lack of self-esteem, mental health problems and family breakdown. These are all issues where churches' focus on relationship building and pastoral care is a particular strength. At a time when Britain has been voted the loneliness capital of Europe¹ and when one in ten adults say they have no close friends², this work to tackle loneliness and build relationships is absolutely crucial.

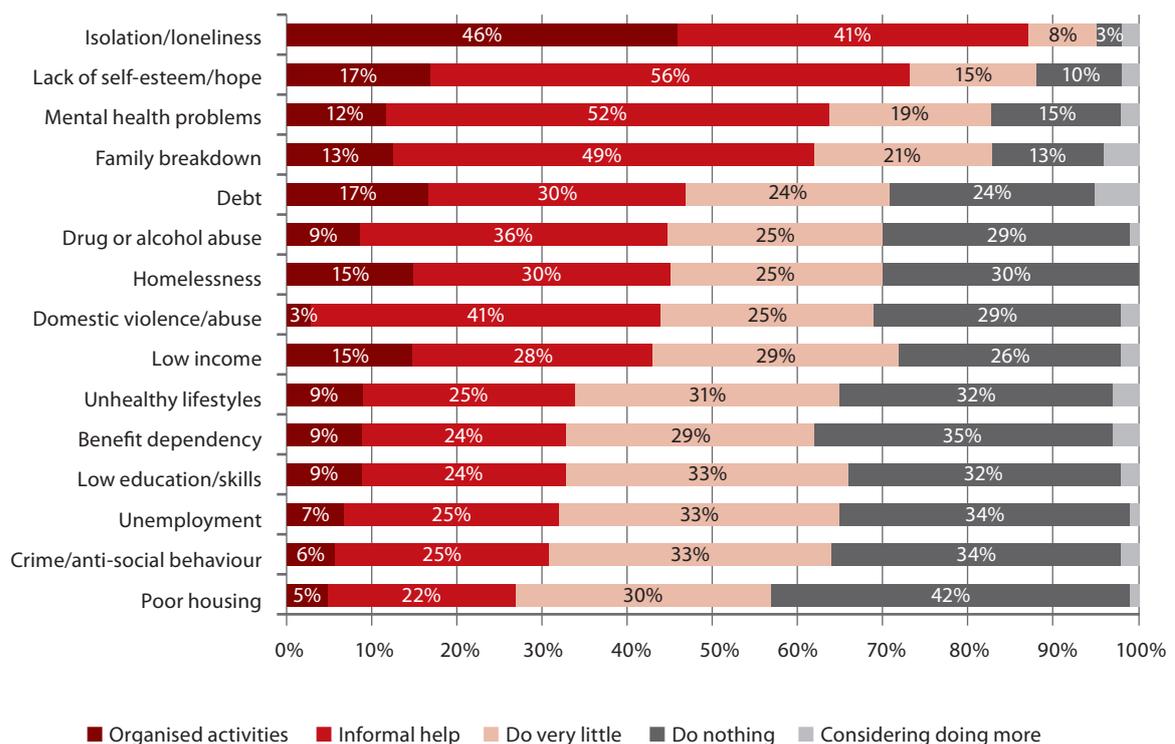
Churches often respond to social isolation by creating opportunities for people to connect with and get to know others through, for example, lunch clubs, drop-in cafés or befriending services. They also offer a great deal of informal support to local people. Though often unacknowledged, this should not be undervalued. By fostering social networks, friendship groups and family life, particularly for those who may otherwise be excluded, churches help to provide the ‘glue’ that binds people together and that is vital to growing stronger, more resilient communities in which people can flourish.

Churches also offer a significant amount of organised activity to tackle debt, low income and homelessness. In each of these cases, Christian charities, such as Trussell Trust and Christians Against Poverty, have developed effective models for addressing these needs that make it easier for churches to engage.

The most active churches are disproportionately found in the most deprived areas, where nearly half the churches are addressing nine or more local issues. Larger churches are generally more active, but many smaller churches are very involved in meeting a wide range of social needs in their local community.

The survey also sought to identify needs that are not currently being met by churches. Here, the most significant areas were unhealthy lifestyles, low income, benefit dependency, debt, low education and unemployment. In each case, around a fifth of clergy identified these as major or significant problems in their area, but said that their church was currently doing little or nothing to address them.

Figure 1: Extent to which churches serve people experiencing each of the following social issues



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A CHURCH AT THE HEART OF ITS COMMUNITY

'I found out on twitter that the local post office was going to close and knew that this was the opportunity I'd been waiting for – something that would help to put our church back at the heart of our community.'

Father Andrew, vicar of St James' and St Mary's in Kilburn, responded to the tweet and over the following two years negotiated for a post office to be established in his church building. The church has also opened a café, stationery shop, florist and a soft play area for young children.

'We thought carefully about how we could drive footfall into the church building. We spoke to people and researched what else was going on in the area. We wanted to make sure that we could offer things that would help to bring new people through the door.'

'A lot of people feel awkward about coming into church and so we wanted to create a space that would be welcoming and fun, to bridge the gap that often exists between churches and communities.'

The facilities opened in July 2014 and since then, the church has been full of people enjoying the new space and the chance to meet and spend time with others.

These activities have also changed the church community.

'It's beginning to change us,' says Father Andrew, 'It's making us think about how we can be as a worshipping community in this newly renovated building. We want to retain our identity, but also to reflect our new relationship with our community. Before we made these changes, people just used to come to us for church services, so we were in control. Now we have to be open to the people who come through the door for other reasons.'

'I would recommend this to anybody: find something that meets a community need, then bring it into the church. It will bring in new people and it will also force your church community to respond to people who are coming to the church and just being themselves. This is a completely different and life-giving experience.'



ACTIVITIES BEING OFFERED BY CHURCHES

As well as asking clergy how their churches were addressing particular social needs, we asked whether they were involved in offering specific activities (the full list is shown in Figure 2). The responses reveal, once again, the sheer scale of church engagement with local communities: 76% run activities in local schools, 66% help with food banks, 60% offer parent and toddler groups and 53% organise lunch clubs or drop-ins. An astounding 92% of churches are involved in at least one of the activities listed and many churches offer multiple activities: 67% run four or more and 28% more than seven.

The nature of church-based activities has not changed significantly since our last survey three years ago, with a few notable exceptions. Far more churches report that they are now involved in running food banks – 66% in 2014 compared to 33% in 2011. The proportion of churches offering activities for children – breakfast clubs, after schools clubs, or holiday activities – has also risen substantially, whilst the number of churches offering youth work and parenting courses has dropped.

Food banks. Given the growth of church-based food banks in the last three years, we wanted to explore this area further. We found that 76% of churches collect food for a local food bank, 39% provide volunteers, 29% help to manage one, 22% give out vouchers and 14% offer the use of their premises. Grouping all of these activities together gives a total of 81% of churches involved with food banks in one or more ways.

Many churches that are helping to manage food banks also offer additional community services: 63% run lunch clubs or drop-in cafes, 40% offer debt or money advice services, 17% run furniture banks, 11% offer practical skills training and 6% run jobs clubs. This is evidence that the recently advocated 'Food Bank Plus' model (where food banks acts as local hubs) already exists to some degree.³

Credit Unions. Given the Archbishop of Canterbury's public support for credit unions, we also wanted to explore the extent to which churches are involved with them. We found that 79% of clergy believe that 'helping people to manage their money wisely is an important part of the Church's mission'.

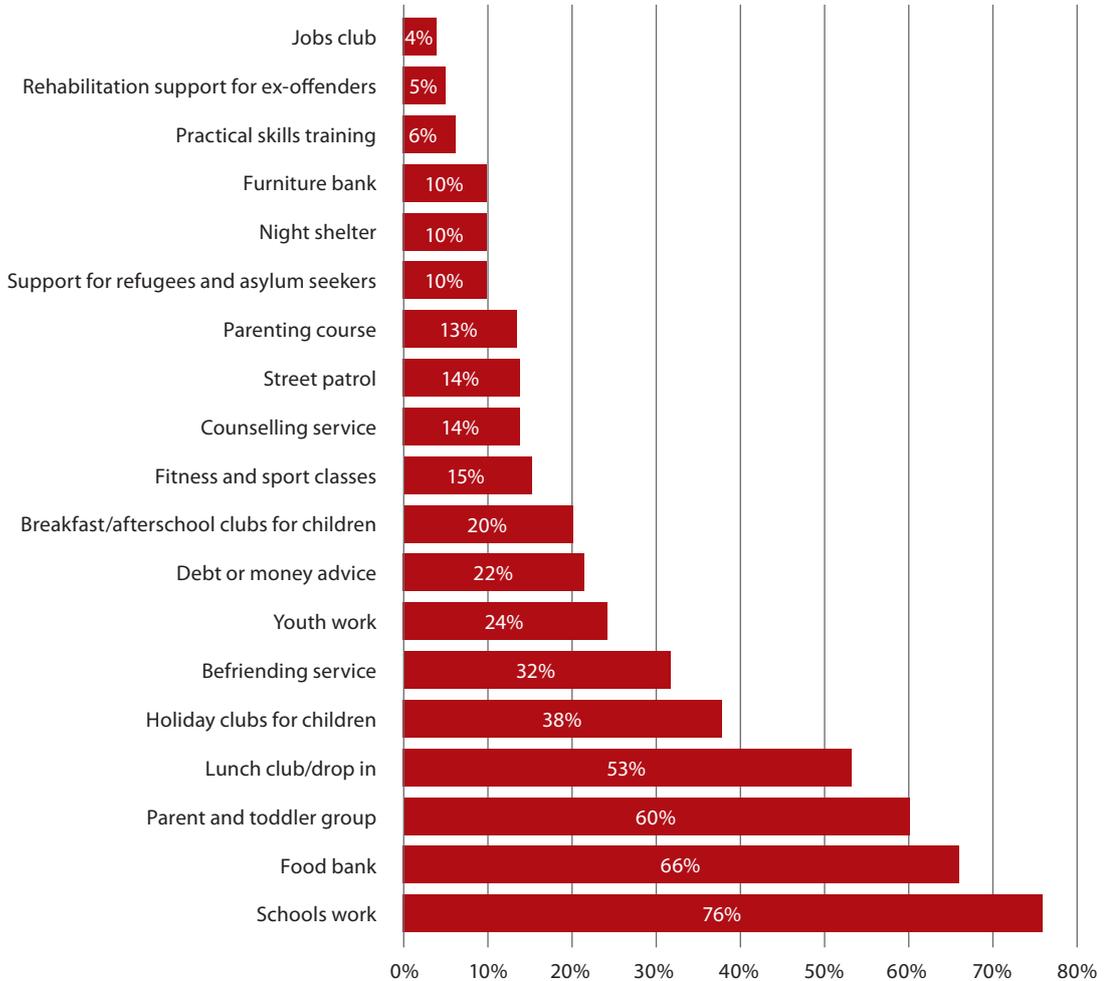
22% of churches offer debt or money advice services. Almost a fifth of churches (17%) also support credit unions in a number of ways: 11% encourage church members to join one, 11% promote the credit union within the community and 7% have church members who volunteer at a credit union. Furthermore, nearly a third (29%) of churches say they are actively considering or interested in exploring some kind of additional supporting activity.

Partnerships. Our survey shows that nine in ten church leaders feel they have a good relationship with other churches and, in many cases, are working constructively together to deliver activities – a very positive result.

The smaller number of churches working in partnerships with local businesses, social services, other faith groups and Citizens Advice Bureaux (around 5%) may be accounted for by the lack of opportunities to do so, particularly in rural areas. However, there are opportunities for churches to think more creatively, as examples of successful partnerships with post offices, credit unions or local businesses demonstrate.

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Figure 2: Proportion of churches involved in offering specific activities



GROWTH OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

There is a general desire to continue to expand the level of church-based social action, nationally and locally. Almost half (47%) of clergy believe that churches are not doing enough to tackle poverty in this country; even more (71%) say that their church could do more in their local area. This desire is matched by optimistic growth forecasts: 70% of churches expect their community activities to grow to some degree in the next five years, and 21% expect them to grow significantly.

Interestingly, the more a church is doing to tackle poverty, the more likely they are to believe that they should be doing more: 65% of those addressing one to four local issues feel they should be doing more, compared to 72% addressing five to eight and 75% addressing nine or more. This suggests that, once a church has begun to help those affected by particular social issues, they are more likely to recognise, and wish to respond to, other local issues.

FOOD BANKS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

Middlesbrough food bank was set up September 2012 and is now supported by over 100 churches across Teesside and Yorkshire. As a Trussell Trust food bank, it operates on a voucher basis, where local referral agencies such as social services or GP surgeries give vouchers to people in crisis situations that entitle them to three days' worth of nutritional food.

The food bank is open five days a week, in seven different locations, and feeds around 100 people a week. In the first two years of being open, over 6,000 food parcels were distributed.

Now that the food bank is well established, manager Nigel Perrot, has been developing some additional projects to sit alongside. The first of these is a debt advice service. In partnership with the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), a designated advice worker will be funded to give food bank clients debt advice and to signpost people onto more in-depth support services where necessary. The food bank will also run its own money advice course, called Made of Money, in partnership with the CAB.

Beyond this, the food bank is also working with a local charity to run a cookery course. On this course people will have an opportunity to learn how to use a slow cooker to put together basic meals. At the end of the two sessions, each course participant will be given their own slow cooker (thanks to a corporate sponsor) plus a bag full of store cupboard ingredients to help them get started.

'I'm really excited about next year,' says Nigel, 'With these new projects, I think we change gear a bit and do even more to address people's needs in a really practical way.'

'The food bank and all these other projects have really helped to break down barriers between churches and local communities. In the past there was a sense of the church being separate, but now people are starting to realise that the church has an important role to play in the community.'



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BARRIERS TO GROWTH

The primary barrier to growth, identified by 95% of respondents, is a lack of volunteers. Given that 78% of respondents also point to a lack of passion for action within the church, we can assume that this is one factor in the shortage of volunteer manpower. However, the reasons why churches struggle to recruit volunteers are complex.

More creative approaches to volunteerism are clearly needed, including involving the wider community, particularly young people or project beneficiaries. This would not only provide extra resources, but also offer people opportunities to build on their own experience and skills, and develop further links between the church family and the community.

The secondary barrier to growth is a lack of leaders – identified by 93% of respondents. Investment in new volunteers and leaders would relieve the pressure on the church leader's time – a significant factor, according to 92% of respondents, in preventing them doing more in the community.

Many church leaders (57%) say that they would need support and advice from others to do more. This desire for support is paralleled by a certain reluctance to take risks. Less than a third (29%) of vicars say they have stretched themselves to help those affected by poverty. This tendency to 'play it safe' is a real barrier to growth, as those who are more willing to take risks tend to be doing more in their communities. These results suggest that many church leaders need support and encouragement to try new approaches and to go further in their efforts to tackle poverty.

CONCLUSION

Our findings show that churches are making a vital contribution to our society, providing services that directly tackle poverty as well as informal, relational support that helps to build stronger communities. This support is more important than ever as communities become increasingly fragmented and many other organisations struggle to find the funding they need to continue their work.

In order to enhance the impact of church-based social action, further thought should be devoted to ways in which churches can do more to address areas of unmet need, such as unhealthy lifestyles, low income, benefit dependency and debt. Expansion of church activities, however, is unlikely to happen, unless more leaders and volunteers can be recruited. Encouraging and equipping church members to volunteer will be essential, as well as enabling community members outside the church to help run church-based activities. Exploring partnerships with other community-based institutions will also help to strengthen and grow the work that churches are able to do locally.

This report was authored by Bethany Eckley of Church Urban Fund and Tom Sefton of the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Team.

To see the full report please visit: www.cuf.org.uk/church-in-action

1 Office of National Statistics survey reported in the Telegraph, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1oGmmEg>

2 Relate survey reported in the Independent, 2014 <http://ind.pn/1kyh0uy>

3 *Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*, report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, 2014