

Introduction

to the Springfield Children's Centre case study

This case study tells the story of the decision to develop the Springfield Children's Centre through a partnership between Birmingham City Council (BCC) and the Springfield Project, located in the Springfield area of Birmingham. It is based on interviews with staff of BCC and interviews and focus groups with staff and management committee of the Springfield Project and members of St Christopher's Church congregation, carried out during September 2008 by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research.

The Springfield Project was established nearly ten years ago under the auspices of St Christopher's Church, Springfield, with which it retains close links. Springfield is a vibrant and diverse area; it also ranks amongst the top 20% most deprived areas in Birmingham. Its population is largely Pakistani in heritage, but includes people from a wide variety of cultural and faith backgrounds. Over its lifetime the Project has worked with hundreds of local families, providing services that include a nursery, a parent and toddler group, family support and a youth group. In the same period, faith-based organisations like the Springfield Project have moved into the policy spotlight,¹ seen by policy makers as 'sources of values and commitment', with an important contribution to 'building a sense of local community and renewing civil society'.²

At the time of BCC's first approach to the Springfield Project in 2003 to consider the development of a Children's Centre, the timescale proved to be too tight. Following a further invitation and a period of consultation in 2005, the decision was made to proceed with partnership arrangements with BCC to establish a purpose-built Children's Centre as an integral part of the Springfield Project, supported by £2 million of city council funding. Like other Children's Centres, it meets the Children's Centre 'core offer' as set out by central government of:

- Early education integrated with day care
- Family support and parental outreach
- Child and family health services
- Links with schools and Children's Information Services
- Links with Jobcentre Plus.³

Springfield Children's Centre is, however, unique amongst Birmingham's 67 Children's Centres in its location within a faith-based organisation closely linked to an Anglican church. The Children's Centre began providing services in March 2008, with its formal launch taking place on 15 November 2008.

The case study findings are presented anonymously; key points are illustrated with unattributed quotations (indicated in italics). The study describes the factors that led to the development of the Children's Centre; the partnership with Birmingham City Council; the contribution of key stakeholders and the Centre's distinctive nature and contribution. Critical success factors in its development are suggested. We conclude by offering some reflections on what the findings may mean for others involved in the development of faith-based community services in collaboration with statutory agencies.



¹Cairns, B., Harris, M. and Hutchison, R. (2007) 'Sharing God's love or meeting government goals? Local churches and public policy implementation', in *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp413-32.

²Local Government Association (2002) *Faith and community: A good practice guide for local authorities*, LGA, London.

³www.springfieldproject.org.uk/index (2008) 'What is a Children's Centre?' (downloaded 26-9-08)

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Credits

With thanks to Birmingham City Council, the children, parents, volunteers and staff at Springfield Children's Centre and members of St Christophers Church and Woodlands Road Mosque.

This case study was the result of a partnership between CUF and IVAR. To discuss specific matters relating to this case study please contact Andy Turner at andy.turner@cufx.org.uk



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Part One

The Study Findings

The decision to proceed with the development of Springfield Children's Centre - motivating factors

Four key factors motivated BCC staff and those directly involved with the Springfield Project to consider the development of the Springfield Children's Centre as an integral part of the Springfield Project.

Tackling disadvantage

First, BCC staff, in line with government policy and the Every Child Matters agenda, needed to ensure that Children's Centres were established in the most disadvantaged areas of the city, of which the Springfield / Sparkhill area was one. Centres needed to provide high quality services in an inclusive way, in line with the Children's Centre 'core offer'. Exploratory discussions suggested that the Springfield Project offered an appropriate host for a Children's Centre, could meet the local authority's requirements and could do so within the required timescale.

Meeting local needs

Second, the commitment of those involved in the Springfield Project to meeting need in the community was recognised by BCC staff. Third, Project staff and committee members were keen to continue and extend the Project's existing work. Entering into a partnership with BCC offered the opportunity to do this: 'everyone realises what a great offer was being made to us that could really make an impact on people's lives'. For BCC, the fact that the Project already provided a range of high quality services was a major factor in their approach, as was its history of inter-faith working.

A practical expression of faith

Finally, a crucial dimension to the motivation of the Springfield Project's staff and committee members and the clergy and congregation of St Christopher's Church was their commitment to expressing Christian faith through practical action: 'everyone realised that our work as Christians has to be rooted in being here for people'. They were clear, however, that overt evangelism was not part of their agenda for the Children's Centre.

The decision to proceed with the development of the Children's Centre - issues to be taken into account

The importance of being inclusive

For BCC, a primary concern was the Springfield Project's ability to meet the Children's Centre core offer, to be willing to work in partnership and to be fully inclusive in ethos and in practice. In this respect the agendas of BCC and the Springfield Project were at one.

The centrality of faith

For the Springfield Project, it was important to be able to maintain their Christian origins and ethos: 'we wanted to keep faith at the centre of it', while at the same time providing services in an inclusive way to a multi-racial and multi-faith community. They also needed to be sure of the support of the St Christopher's Church congregation. It was therefore important to take time over the decision, to think and to pray, and to be sure that worshippers understood that there would be, for example, major changes to the structure of the building (including demolition of the church hall) and financial implications.

The support of local people

As a Christian church in an area with a majority Muslim population, it was vitally important to ensure that the Children's Centre initiative had the support of local people: 'we could not operate if the Muslim community did not want us to be here'.

The partnership between the Springfield Project and Birmingham City Council

A relationship of trust

The partnership between the Springfield Project and BCC was described by both parties as characterised by a high degree of trust: 'it is essentially a relationship of trust, and really quite extraordinary in that'. Those involved in the negotiations over buildings and finance felt that the discussions had been conducted in a very positive manner, with trust, openness and generosity of spirit on both sides. The worries that some in the Springfield Project had had about co-option into a government agenda, or about their faith foundation being diluted, had not materialised; instead there was: 'incredible generosity towards the church and goodwill'.

Shared vision and values

A number of factors were identified as contributing to the positive nature of the partnership. These included shared vision and values: in particular a concern with providing high quality services for children and families. A further important feature was the city council's recognition of the Project's faith foundations, and the partners' shared commitment to openness and flexibility. The role of key individuals both in BCC - 'there have been some key champions of the initiative in the local authority' - and in the Springfield Project was seen as crucial.



Key stakeholders in the Children's Centre initiative

The local community

The good relationship built up over several years with the nearby mosque, and their support during the planning stages of the Springfield Children's Centre, was essential to the way in which the Centre was perceived in the predominantly Muslim local community: 'the mosque has been key in terms of stakeholder goodwill'. Members of the mosque felt that the Springfield Project provided a good service to the community and were keen to see the Children's Centre develop. Young families were very positive about the idea; older people too were pleased that there would be more local facilities for families: 'lots and lots of people have been really for this venture'.

Other professionals

Positive relationships with health professionals, as well as financial support from the Heart of Birmingham Teaching Primary Care Trust, were also important: 'this has been a good and positive relationship that has enabled us to grow and not lurch from year to year'.

The wider church

The Christian development agency Tearfund played a vital role in providing professional advice and consultancy to the Project and St Christopher's congregation and clergy in thinking through the issues involved in developing a Children's Centre.

Staff in the Diocese of Birmingham's Community Regeneration Department were extremely *helpful in facilitating* links with other parts of the Church of England infrastructure and in helping staff of the Project to apply for Church Urban Fund money.

The contribution of the Church Urban Fund

Financial support from the Church Urban Fund enabled the church to carry out some of the preparatory work associated with the development of a Children's Centre, including funding some of the legal costs: 'their [CUF] contribution was crucial; nobody else would give us that money; who else will give you money with no guarantee anything will come of it?'

The distinctive nature and contribution of Springfield Children's Centre

A warm and inclusive welcome

Families using the new Children's Centre described its characteristics in terms of the warmth of the welcome offered, its inclusive way of working and the variety of benefits offered to parents and children: 'the Christian and non-Christian elements, including the space, the people, the facilities, are well blended together'. The recognition of different religious festivals and provision of materials in community languages was valued. Parents welcomed the fact that their children could benefit from a variety of high quality services within walking distance of their homes. They were pleased that their children could learn new skills, play with others from different faiths and prepare for school life. For parents themselves,



the opportunity to return to study while knowing their children were cared for, to benefit from courses on aspects of parenting, and to make new friends, was highly valued.

A genuine expression of faith

The tone set by paid staff, of all faiths, was seen as contributing to the Centre's distinctive ethos: 'a very important thing has been the combination of professionalism and the very genuine expression of faith of the employed people here'. The ongoing connection with St Christopher's Church, through the involvement of worshippers as volunteers or management committee members, and the links between the Project and the spiritual life of the church, were seen as key factors.

Critical success factors in the development of Springfield Children's Centre

Case study participants identified four critical success factors in the development of the Children's Centre.

Vision

First was the importance of maintaining a vision of the purpose of the whole venture. While practical issues such as the design of the building needed close attention during the developmental phase, it was also vital to be able to see beyond them: 'what's helped us is that we've not seen the building as the end point'.

Church backing and expertise

Second was the backing of St Christopher's Church congregation and access to the professional expertise of some of its members. The Project had also drawn on external expertise in the form of legal advice, support from the Diocesan infrastructure and other parishes with experience of developing Children's Centres: 'to be able to say there's a Children's Centre in Stoke and an Elim Centre that's done it; all the visiting we did was incredibly helpful'.

Support of the local community

Third, the support of the local community was vital: 'you can't just put a big building there; you have to build relationships'. The good relationships built up between the Project, St Christopher's Church and the local community had influenced BCC's decision to pursue the idea of partnership: 'they are embedded in their area'.

Faith and inclusiveness

Finally, the commitment of those involved in the Springfield Project to providing an inclusive service to their multi-racial and multi-faith community has been maintained without diluting the fact that their motivation lay in their Christian faith. This openness was considered important in order to reassure people that there was no 'hidden agenda' to their work, and because it helped others - often from other faiths - to be more open about themselves and their beliefs too: 'People come to us because they know we are who we say we are and we're nothing threatening or dangerous that they need to be wary of. They don't feel at risk of being subjected to anything. We are very positive and quietly confident about who we are and it seems to rub off; others are who they are'.

Part Two

Concluding Reflections

At a time when voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are under increasing pressure to provide public services⁴, this case study demonstrates the valuable contribution that one group of VCOs - faith-based organisations - can make to the provision of community-based services in partnership with statutory agencies, provided that certain criteria can be met.

The need for a shared vision

Contributions such as that of the Springfield Project are possible where faith-based organisations and their statutory partners share the vision of high quality local services, and are willing to trust each other and work together towards that goal. The partnership between the Springfield Project and Birmingham City Council appears to work well because of these shared goals, trust amongst key individuals, careful thought and preparation. The commitment of both parties to working in an inclusive way has been crucial. The willingness of BCC staff to accept the Springfield Project's strong foundation in the Christian faith has been vital; without that willingness, partnership might not have been achieved. Both parties have been able to gain from the partnership, to the ultimate benefit of local families and children.



Strength of organisational identity

The Springfield Project's deep roots in the Christian faith and also in the wider, multi-faith, local community, have enabled it to straddle the boundaries of different faiths, to feel confident to negotiate on its own terms without compromising its identity and ultimately to work in partnership with a secular statutory agency. In the absence of a clear vision for the future of their organisation and its place in the community, smaller organisations in particular risk being co-opted to meet the agendas of statutory agencies and losing their own distinctive features.

The need for appropriate expertise

The Springfield Project was able to draw on the skills of members of St Christopher's Church congregation and on the resources of the wider Church of England infrastructure in order to help with the developmental phase of the Children's Centre. Many inner city parishes have much smaller congregations than St Christopher's, and fewer people with the professional skills that are needed in such a venture. As we have noted elsewhere,⁵ the focus of the Church as an institution is changing, with more churches developing community projects providing services not only to their own worshippers but to other local people. This places demands on their congregations in terms of the organisation and management of projects; it also potentially changes the role of clergy if the church is to take on direct responsibility for oversight and management of community projects. In areas such as Springfield, an understanding of multi-faith working will also be a crucial ingredient in the development of any such project.

These factors need to be borne in mind by both faith-based organisations and their statutory partners in order to facilitate effective collaboration.

⁴HM Treasury (2005) *Exploring the role of the third sector in public service delivery and reform*, HM Treasury, London.

⁵Aston Centre for Voluntary Action Research (2004) *Study on the Role and Contribution of Local Parishes in Local Communities in the Diocese of Birmingham*, ACVAR, Birmingham.