

Beyond Belief?

Faith at work in the community:

A report by South East of England

Faith Forum about faith based

regeneration activities - by Sarah Lewis



Foreword

Historically faith groups have been an enormous resource to the country by running activities that bring social and economic benefits to their local communities. Despite the drop in attendance in many of our faith activities the social action has continued unabated and its value is now even more crucial as finding money for such services becomes harder, if not impossible, to find.

Over the last few years encouragement from national and regional government for the inclusion of faith partners has been prominent and welcome. In particular the developing role of the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) will benefit from recognising the role of activists from the faith sector outlined in this research. I hope this research will only strengthen the case to ensure full participation and true partnership across the region with faith groups to enable sustainable, empowered and vibrant communities.

This report details research that has been carried out over the past year into faith-based social and community action. Ideally it would have been useful to have covered the whole region but this would have been a huge undertaking if not an impossible task. Jointly funded by SEEDA, the South East's Regional Development Agency and churches in the South East, it looks at some of the most deprived areas of our Region and illustrates how faith groups are working within their communities to tackle social need.

This report would not have been possible without the financial assistance of SEEDA and the South East's churches, and the additional support of RAISE – the South East's network for the voluntary and community sector and the Regional Assembly, SEERA. The Executive of the South East England Faith Forum and the staff at Church in Society have also given invaluable time and expertise. Sarah Lewis has done a remarkable piece of work in such a short period of time and we are all indebted to her for this report. Thank you to you all.

However, most important of all are the thousands of volunteers, employees, members and adherents from Synagogues, Temples, Gurdwaras, Mosques, Churches and other faith groups who have given their time to fill in forms and be interviewed about their work and who give tirelessly week by week in serving the communities in which they are placed. The impact that it is having upon our communities cannot be truly measured but without the faith sector our country would be a very different place.

Revd Peter Southcombe
Executive Chair - South East England Faith Forum
March 2004

The South East England Faith Forum (SEEFF) was established to help faith groups throughout the South East to take part effectively in the process of building sustainable communities and to liaise with regional structures.

Aims-to encourage and enable faith communities in the South East England region to:

- Offer welfare, support and education services to local communities, particularly communities suffering poverty and deprivation
- Contribute to the social, community, religious well-being of the region
- Work together to develop and share experience, practice and learning, for the benefit of local communities and for the faith communities
- Represent their views and experience to structures in the region.

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Introduction

The aim of this research has been to look into the extent and nature of faith-based social action and other work that aims to tackle social exclusion and encourage regeneration in the South-East region. Using a combination of postal surveys, interviews and observation a total of six areas across the South East were researched. Almost 400 faith groups have been contacted and dozens of interviews have been conducted with workers, volunteers, users and non-users who mostly expressed enthusiasm, occasionally hostility and sometimes complete indifference. The work was funded mainly by SEEDA, who have also funded research into how churches are engaging with local communities in the cities of Brighton and Hove, Portsmouth and Southampton. The work in these cities is being done by the Shaftesbury Society in partnership with ENGAGE in Brighton and Hove and in collaboration with SCRATCH (Southampton City and Region Action to Combat Hardship), in Southampton. The findings of this work will be published later in 2004. In Brighton and Hove the SEEFF research has been carried out in collaboration with ENGAGE and ENGAGE's findings on church-based community action in three city centre wards are referred to in this report.

The placing of faith groups amongst the category of voluntary and community sector has been recognised at a national level by the Home Office and at a regional level by RAISE, the South East's representative body for the sector. However, this inclusion of faith groups in a sector which does recognised work in tackling social exclusion, deprivation and need has not always been welcomed, even by faith groups themselves. Some of the people spoken to during the course of this research felt that faith groups were, or should be, solely concerned with religion. The evidence amassed by this research and by other research elsewhere in the country suggests otherwise. Some faith groups are indeed solely concerned with religion and some difficulties have been encountered by some of the faith groups who *do* work in their communities. However, a picture has emerged of faith groups across the Region engaging with their local communities, serving their local communities and listening to their local communities. Faith-based and faith-involved social action is not just notable for its extent. It is also notable for its longevity. Many Gurdwaras, Churches, Temples, Synagogues and Mosques have been at the centre of their communities for decades, if not centuries, and will almost certainly be part of their communities for decades and centuries to come. The work of faith groups in this area may not be perfect, but it does need to be recognised.

This report comes in four parts. The first part describes some of the main themes that have emerged over the course of the research. The second aims to map out the extent and nature of faith-based social action in Brighton and Hove, Hastings, the Isle of Wight, Medway, Dartford and Thanet. The third looks in more detail at selected faith-based and faith-involved activities and paints a more detailed picture of the extent to which individuals and communities are being helped, involved and empowered by and with their local faith groups. The conclusion then aims to bring together the evidence to assess the impact that faith-based social action is having in the South East and to look at how this work could develop in the future.

The South East Region is typically seen as affluent and the people who live here are regarded as fortunate. However, those living, working and volunteering in this Region can tell a very different story. The South East is indeed relatively affluent, but that is not the full picture. The areas researched are some of the poorest and most deprived parts of the South East Region and many wards score highly on national measures of deprivation and have proven high levels of social and individual need. However, just as there are areas of prosperity within the researched areas, there are also pockets of deprivation within even the most affluent parts of our Region. This research does not tell the whole story for all the faith groups or for the whole of the South East Region. What it does do is begin to tell the story of some of the people and communities who are involved in faith-based social action and begin to assess whether this work is having a positive impact upon the people who matter.

Themes

This chapter looks at the main themes that have emerged from the research; “what”, “why”, “how” and a number of other factors that are crucial when considering the nature of faith-based social action. The following is not a comprehensive list of all the themes that have emerged, however it does detail the major issues that have emerged repeatedly when talking to faith groups in the South East.

What is Faith-based Social Action?

“Yes, I’ve heard about churches getting involved in community work, but I don’t know much about it”, Councillor, East Sussex

Broad and varied

The example given of the Islamic Information Centre is a response from one faith group to the survey that asked faith groups about their involvement in social action and is an example of how wide the definition of social action can be. When asked to self-define, people did exactly that and the responses were varied and interesting. There were many examples given of social action in its most commonly recognised forms: credit unions, advice services, homelessness assistance and affordable food. The most common activities included parent and toddler groups, lunch clubs and drop-in sessions. Catholic churches and synagogues were particularly likely to mention links with local schools such as visits to schools and visits from schools to the place of worship. Buddhists and some other faith groups mentioned meditation and spiritual enlightenment. Sikhs and Muslims often simply didn’t mention the fact that their places of worship were open to all for food and shelter, maybe because this was such an integral part of their culture that it did not warrant a mention as a “project” or “activity”. Some mentioned only the activities that were open to people who were not members of their faith and others mentioned only activities that were confined to people of their faith. Some faith groups mentioned the work of their members as local councillors and school governors.

The Islamic Information Centre in Hastings works to “clarify myths and dis-information about Islam through individual and group meetings”. In a deprived area where Muslims form a small minority of the population such work could help build understanding about a minority group and increase social cohesion.

By allowing for such a broad definition of social action we are able to paint a picture that is colourful, without being complete. The fact that a faith group did not mention an activity does not mean that it was not taking place. It merely suggests that the person completing the survey used their own interpretation, coloured by cultural, religious and personal factors, of what is meant by social action. Such a subjective approach is perhaps inevitable when working across so many different cultures and faiths and with so many different individuals.

Faith-based or faith-involved?

The example of Preston Community Partnership shows how varied the extent of faith involvement in social action can be. Social action with faith involvement does not have to be run exclusively by faith groups. Some faith groups insisted on employees sharing their faith. Others believed there were benefits to be gained from employing people of no faith or from a different faith. Some faith groups offered their buildings to host community activities, without any further involvement, others formed partnerships with secular organisations to tackle social need. This variety makes it difficult to categorise faith-based social action or place such action into convenient boxes. It does however, characterise one of the main strengths of faith involvement in social action - its diversity.

Preston Community Partnership is based on a deprived estate in Ryde on the Isle of Wight. Although Preston Community Partnership is secular in its aims, objectives and the way in which it is run, it is Chaired by the local Church of England Vicar, some of the volunteers attend the Church and the Church buildings are used for some of the Partnership’s work. The Vicar described Preston Community Partnership as “faith-involved rather than faith-based” and both the staff and the Church see benefits coming from this approach.

Why Faith-based Social Action?

“So why are they doing all this community work? I thought faith groups were to do with religion?”, Councillor, East Sussex

Faith

Many interviewees, when asked why they were involved in social action, simply spoke about their faith. Virtually all the people spoken to in the course of the research saw their faith as being absolutely central to their work in their local communities. People spoke about being at the heart of their communities and about not “standing by” whilst people were in need. Examples can be found in the traditions and writings of all the major faiths about the duty of the faithful to serve the needy. Some of those spoken to had never questioned their work in communities - seeing it as a natural extension of their faith. Others had come to the decision to get involved after much thought and prayer.

In 1995, Ryde Baptist Church was seriously damaged by a major fire and this provided the starting point for a radical re-think about the future of the church. Initially church members were discouraged when a prayer-walk and door-knocking session yielded no response from the local community. However, one Sunday morning when members were leaving their place of worship at the back of the church they were approached by a young homeless man who had been put into temporary accommodation the night before, but who had no money and no money for his electricity meter. He pleaded for help and told them that they were the only people who he thought might be able to help him on a Sunday morning. This incident convinced church members that they did have a role to play helping the disadvantaged in the community. From this incident a vision grew of a 7 day a week community facility.

Social need

The areas studied in the course of this research included some of the most deprived parts of the South East. Indeed, some areas scored highly enough on Government multiple deprivation indices to place them amongst the most deprived in the country. On the Isle of Wight, a mainly rural community suffers particularly from isolation, poor transport links and seasonal unemployment. In parts of Hastings and St Leonards many people are living in highly transient communities and unfit housing. In all the areas studied, the people spoken to were proud of their neighbourhood. Those on the Isle of Wight spoke of their pride in being a much-visited tourist destination and a relatively untouched corner of Britain and people in Brighton and Hove spoke of their pride in their cosmopolitan city. However, pockets and sometimes swathes of deprivation were evident and have been identified by national research in all the selected areas. For faith groups, made up of people who live in the local area, work in the local area and whose children go to school in the local area, these problems were only too evident. The people spoken to during this research wanted to build on the pride they felt in their neighbourhood and ensure that more people felt this pride and felt included in their communities.

The Cowes Youth Bus Service, a stationary bus situated near the centre of Cowes on the Isle of Wight, was started by a local church following concern expressed by a member of the congregation who worked professionally with young people who socialised on the streets of Cowes in the evening. She felt that there was a need for more and better facilities than the statutory organisations were able to provide, if young people were to be properly provided for. Other members of the congregation, most of whom lived locally, knew the local concerns about crime and agreed that they, as a church might be able to fill a gap.

Building need

Many faith groups, particularly churches, meet in old buildings that are in need of urgent repairs or action to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act or which are simply unsuitable for the demands of modern life. Many churches, in particular, are under-used. There are examples of huge churches, open only on Sundays and then only attended by a handful of people, which are sited in areas of high housing demand and high social need. For some faith groups, a catalyst for getting involved in social action is a recognition that external funding could only be obtained for their buildings if they were being used by the local community. This is not necessarily a cynical move. For the aforementioned Ryde Baptist Church, a major fire provided the starting point for a chain of thought that covered faith and social need; the need for building repairs was definitely not the sole reason for its new community centre. However, it is still the case that the need for new or improved buildings is a factor in faith groups becoming involved in social action.

It can be seen from this brief look at why faith groups get involved in social action that there is rarely one simple reason; more often it is a combination of factors that come together and provide a catalyst and a way forward for working with and for their communities.

The Parish Church of St Edmunds on the Temple Hill estate in Dartford was sited in a run-down 1950s building. The building needed major repairs, but was in a prime location. In 2002 the old building was demolished in order to make way for a new church building which will incorporate a Health Centre, Community rooms and a UK Online centre. This project will give the church members a new church building and give the wider community a purpose-built community centre.

Serving whom?

"We see our Temple as a community centre", Hindu faith leader, North Kent

In the club?

The role of the Hindu Sabha in Medway illustrates the central role that faith groups can play in the lives of many individuals, communities and ethnic groups. In the same way that, hundreds of years ago, a church was the focal point for community life in every village, a similar role is played by Temples, Mosques and Gurdwaras in the lives of many people from non-Christian faiths in modern Britain. Many Sikhs, for example, attend their local Gurdwara every day, using it not only as a place of worship, but also as a place for eating, relaxing, learning, seeing friends and building relationships. Taking a Gurdwara, Temple or Mosque out of a community would, in many cases, leave a huge hole at the heart of that community and a gap in the lives of many people.

The Hindu Sabha in Gillingham is the only Hindu Temple in Medway and as such is much more than a place of worship, forming a focal point for Hindus living in Medway and the surrounding parts of North Kent. The Temple runs Hindi classes, music classes and operates as a community centre, as well as working closely with Medway Ethnic Minority Forum to improve the welfare of ethnic minority people in Medway.

Although 71.7% of people who answered the question about religion in the 2001 England and Wales Census identified themselves as Christians, Sunday church attendance has been declining in recent years and the role of the church at the centre of the community is less certain now than in the past. However, many of the churches who took part in this research are responding to these trends by throwing open their doors to all people of all faiths and of no faith and re-asserting their role as a focal point for communities. Many of the churches had established a relationship of mutual respect with service users from non-Christian faiths and there were examples, including that of St Leonards Baptist Church which is described in more detail later in the report, of Muslims happily entering a church in preference to other community facilities and of refugees finding a welcome in a foreign land from a faith that was not their own.

This research was carried out in mainly urban areas. However, there is some evidence that churches in rural communities often still fulfil the central role that was played by even more churches in years gone by. In addition, many of the churches visited in the course of this research, were situated on quite isolated estates and had taken the opportunity to use their facilities to provide facilities that went beyond worship, tackling social need as well as spiritual need. Thus some churches were showing signs of reclaiming their role at the heart of a community; a role that is being fulfilled more than adequately by Temples, Mosques and Gurdwaras amongst Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities.

The St Michael and St Bishoy Coptic Orthodox Church in Margate offers support to refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan and Ethiopia.

Agendas, Evangelism and Perceptions

“Yes, we would like more people to become Christians, but show me an organisation that doesn’t have an agenda! At least we are up-front about it”, Church employee, East Sussex

Perceptions and reality

Faith groups are very conscious of the perception of many secular people and organisations that their work might be motivated by evangelism. Whilst all the people of faith who have been spoken to were motivated by their faith and wanted other people to share the joy and peace they derived from their faith, there was no sign that evangelism was the main motive for any social action. Indeed one project leader stated that if evangelism was the aim for their community action, then any attempts to convert had been remarkably unsuccessful! None of the project leaders or faith leaders felt that attendance at their faith meetings had been increased significantly as a result of social action. The project leaders and workers were seeing the outputs and outcomes very much in terms of tackling material, emotional and community need rather than as an exercise in evangelism.

Kings Church, an evangelical church situated in Hastings, carries out a wide range of social action projects, with a particular emphasis on working with children and young people from deprived areas of Hastings and St Leonards. Those working on these projects are open and up-front about the fact that they would like to share their faith with others, although this is by no means the only aim of their work. The aim of the youth work has been stated as “for every child the chance to choose”. The youth activities are extremely popular and the church makes every effort to ensure that parents know all about the activities and the extent to which Christianity is mentioned during the activities.

Agendas

Several faith groups made the point that many secular groups becoming involved in social action have an “agenda”, or aims and objectives over and above those that were put in writing; for example increasing membership. One person observed that the right to change religion was enshrined as part of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and therefore evangelism should not be viewed negatively by secular organisations. Some of those spoken to felt aggrieved that faith groups were, in their view, singled out by funders and other organisations for having an “evangelism agenda” whilst agendas pursued by secular groups were often left unquestioned. However, these concerns were by no means universal. Of those faith groups who felt they did encounter suspicion, some addressed the issue by openly acknowledging that sharing their faith was an aspect of their work, whilst others made a clear separation between their faith work and their social action.

How is it different from secular social action?

I’m yet to be convinced that faith groups should be getting funding for social action when a secular group might do the work just as well”, Voluntary and Community Sector leader

Spirituality

The primary difference between faith-based social action and secular social action that emerged from this research was that of a spiritual dimension. Most of the activities that were visited were motivated by all the factors that motivate secular activities such as a desire for social justice and equality, but with an added spiritual dimension; a dimension that not only informed the motivation for the activities, but also the objectives. The employees and volunteers who were interviewed often spoke about people’s spiritual needs. One faith leader summed up the approach by saying, “A person may be employed, well-fed, have adequate housing and a stable family, whilst still not being happy. We take a holistic approach”.

Blurred boundaries

The extent to which faith-based social action differs from secular activities varies greatly from one project to another. In addition, the influence of faith can vary even within a project or activity, with some parts of the activity being more heavily influenced by faith than others. Many of those working in faith-based activities find themselves wearing a “faith hat” at one time and a “secular hat” at others, whilst other people find they can combine the two.

The Christian Housing Trust in Thanet runs activities that extend far beyond what is suggested by its name. The Trust runs hostels for the homeless, a community café and resource centre, a UK Online Centre, a counselling service and a funding advice service for local organisations. All these activities are delivered in a way whereby the users would not necessarily be aware that they are run by a Christian organisation. However, the motivation for the Trust remains one of faith and the Trust has no plans to change its name.

Professionalism

“Just because we are run by a church, that does not mean that we should be unprofessional or aim to provide anything less than the best service possible for our users. We do not want broken furniture, dirty rooms or to give wrong advice. We want to be the best”, Project Manager, East Sussex

High standards

The project leaders who were spoken to were very clear that their community activities should be run professionally. Great importance was attached to facilities being clean, smart, accessible and well-presented, with frustration being expressed that funding didn't allow for their facilities to be even better presented. More than one person expressed the view that just because an activity was carried out by a faith group, that shouldn't mean that it was of a lower standard or was amateurish in any way. The faith groups were generally quite business-minded and becoming more so. Facilities were being rented out in order to generate income and much thought went into planning for the future.

Professional support

Several of the churches mentioned assistance they had sought and gained from organisations such as Faithworks, the Shaftesbury Society, the local Dioceses and other organisations including SEEFF itself, which help churches operate professionally when involved in social action. None of the non-Christian faiths mentioned receiving such assistance and not all of the Christian faith groups were aware of such sources of support.

Partnership

“We've gained so much from working with other organisations - it's not always easy, but it's definitely easier than going it alone”, Faith Group leader, Isle of Wight

Partnership with secular organisation

The survey results showed that 40% of those responding worked in partnership and most of the partnerships that were mentioned in more detail were with secular organisations. Most of those spoken to reported that their experience of partnership working with secular organisations had been extremely positive, with faith groups being keen to explore this further. A small number of problems were identified, including overcoming initial negative perceptions of faith groups and suspicion of their motives. Some project leaders have also mentioned the delays and frustration that sometimes arose from the involvement of lawyers analysing agreements, and one faith leader expressed concern, based on experience, that faith groups could sign agreements that were not favourable to them if they did not involve lawyers. However, overall, the experience of partnership working has been very positive with reference repeatedly being made to the additional resources and expertise that could be accessed by partnership working and the mutual learning process that brought benefits to all those involved.

Holy Trinity Church in Cliftonville, Thanet, runs a variety of activities through a separate charitable limited company, which are mostly delivered through partnership agreements. The Church currently operates partnerships with Sure Start, Kent County Council, Thanet College, and Church in Society amongst others and also has informal links with many other local organisations. This way of working enables the church to keep its ear to the ground and deliver far more than it would be able to if working alone. The Vicar commented that there are teething problems with partnership working, but that it is worth persevering as the eventual outcomes have always been positive.

Interfaith and multi-faith

Several of those who took part in both the survey and interviews mentioned working with other faith groups as an example of partnership working. This mainly meant ecumenical working between Christian faith groups. No examples were given of faith groups working together with other faiths on actual projects. However, several of those who took part in the research mentioned kinship, and friendship with other faiths as well as working as part of interfaith and multi-faith bodies to ensure that the voices of faith groups were heard in secular decision making processes. These examples were only given in more urban areas where there were active interfaith and multi-faith organisations and not in more rural areas such as the Isle of Wight where the latest census put the percentage following non-Christian faiths at just 1.2%. However, attitudes to working with other faiths were by no means always positive and several faith groups viewed such working with caution. Those who *had* worked informally with other faiths all viewed the experience as a positive one, with no problems being mentioned.

Funding

"I often wonder whether we get turned down because we're a church...I really don't know", Faith Group leader, North Kent

Holy Trinity Church in Dartford has a broad funding base that enables it to deliver in its community development work on a deprived estate in the Parish. Amongst other funding sources the church has accessed SRB funding, the Children's Fund, Local Network funding and the Local Authority. It is considering accessing other funding in the future, including the Area Investment Framework. The lack of reliance on any one single funding source makes it likely that Holy Trinity's community work will be able to continue to address the changing needs of the local community.

Funding success?

Funding is an important issue for virtually all groups in the voluntary and community sector, and that is as true for faith groups as it is for secular groups. However, faith groups *do* face specific challenges and opportunities that often are not faced by secular groups. Funding was raised as an issue in both the postal survey and in all the interviews that were carried out. As can be seen from the results of the postal survey in the following chapter, faith groups in the South East appear to be quite successful in their applications for outside funding; certainly more successful applications were mentioned than unsuccessful ones. Information obtained from interviews and conversations suggest a number of possible explanations for this apparent success. It may be that some respondents were unaware of previous unsuccessful applications. It may indicate that faith groups are quite cautious in their applications. Alternatively it could indicate that faith groups have expertise in funding applications or that faith groups are not viewed negatively by funding organisations. The survey results, therefore, do not provide all the answers. However, the information gathered from interviews and informal conversations goes some way towards filling in the gaps.

Perceptions and challenges

Firstly, the majority of faith groups interviewed and visited had a perception that being a faith group could, potentially, adversely affect the outcome of a funding application. Faith groups felt that there was a perception on the part of some funders that any money might be used to convert or evangelise. There was however no indication that some funding sources were more likely to take a negative view than others. Faith groups had different approaches to this issue. The Christian Housing Trust in Thanet felt that its name possibly did have a negative impact on funding applications, but felt that its name was an important part of its identity and had no plans to change it. Instead they preferred to try and challenge any negative perceptions by building relationships with funders and by providing as much information, including internal evaluation, as possible. The Dartford Community Counselling Service is a Christian counselling service and is proud of its faith origins and ongoing connections. However, the Centre Manager felt that the Service's neutral name might well help when applying for external funding.

Self-funding

Not all faith groups applied for external funding. Of those who answered the survey question about funding, 28% had sought no external funding and did not intend to seek any in the future. Their activities were funded purely by the faith group, particularly through donations from members. When speaking to faith groups who had not sought external funding, there was often enormous pride taken in this fact. Certainly social action funded in this way could be seen as an impressive resource at no cost to the state and the resources offered by such a significant minority of faith groups at no cost to the state cannot be overlooked.

The Lottery

One source of external funding that is extremely popular amongst groups in the voluntary and community sector is the money available through the National Lottery. The same is true for many faith groups; indeed the Lottery has funded a large number of faith-based activities across the South East Region. However, a large number of faith groups spoken to over the course of the research had decided against applying for Lottery funds as many faiths have deep concerns about the impact of gambling upon the vulnerable. Such concerns about the Lottery were by no means held by all. For every faith group that had decided against applying for Lottery funds there were others who were happy to do so. There were also different beliefs held about the Lottery by different members of the same faith group; a fact that may explain the large number of faith groups who were “considering” accessing Lottery funding in the future, as such a decision often followed extensive discussions amongst members.

Initiative

Much concern was expressed by faith representatives about the impact of short-term funding on the ability to tackle long-term need and issues were raised about grant funding versus core funding. These complaints are common throughout the voluntary and community sector. However, overall the picture on funding was a relatively positive one with faith groups being creative in their applications as well as resourceful in looking for ways of self-funding. Many faith groups raised money through subscription payments for activities and through hiring out rooms. Others raised funds by selling off land or by leasing part of their building to other organisations. The ability of faith groups to self-finance has been found to be impressive, however it has often been found that without secular funding many of the projects and activities are unable to develop grow according to the perceived needs of the users. Some faith representatives commented that being a faith group actually widened the availability of funding as they were able to access funding from both secular and faith-based sources and this was felt to have had a positive impact upon the quality and quantity of their social action.

Survey Findings -

How much, what and where?

The methodology

The extent of faith-based social action in the South East was measured in selected areas of the Region: Medway, Dartford, Thanet, Hastings, Brighton and Hove and the Isle of Wight. These areas were selected by SEEDA according to Index of Multiple Deprivation statistics and are deprived compared with the average for the Region as a whole. Selecting areas that were more deprived than the national and regional average enabled the role of faith groups in tackling social need to be better assessed, although it should be recognised that social need does exist, often quite extensively, in other parts of the Region.

The extent of faith-based social action was measured through the use of a postal questionnaire. As many as possible of the faith groups in the selected areas were identified by the use of existing databases and through internet-based research and all those who were identified were sent the postal questionnaire, with a further questionnaire being sent to non-respondents. The questionnaire was mostly quantitative, except for one question where a space was provided for faith groups to describe their activities in their own words.

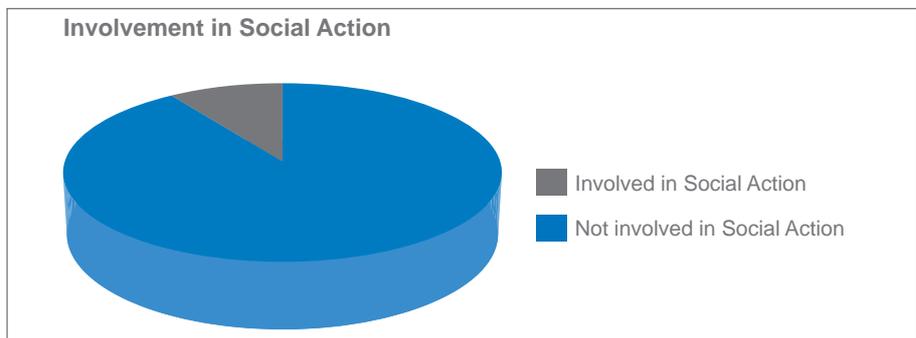
Almost 400 questionnaires were issued and 105 were returned, giving a response rate of 26%. The response rate for Christian faith groups was slightly higher than that for non-Christian faith groups.

What is faith-based social action?

The surveys allowed for faith groups to define what they categorised as social action. This inevitably led to a wide range of activities being mentioned, not all of which might always be categorised as social action by “men in suits”. The issue of what constitutes social action for the purposes of this report has been considered in the previous section. The results in this section are based on what faith groups told us, and interpretation and judgements were kept to a minimum. Comparison with the ENGAGE results from the research simultaneously being carried out amongst Brighton churches suggests that many smaller activities such as parent and toddler groups may have been missed by this research, relying as it does, mainly, on people to volunteer information by means of a postal questionnaire. When activities are visited in person, a larger number of small activities become apparent.

The extent of faith-based social action

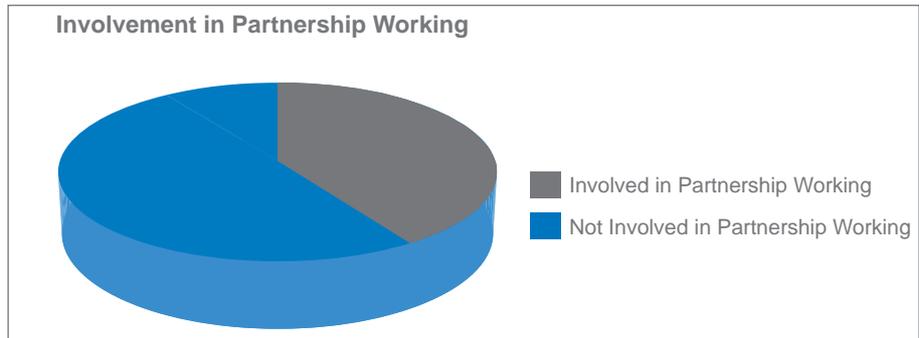
All but six of the respondents (94%) stated that their faith group was involved in social action and just over 200 activities have been identified. The research found that those groups involved in social action were running an average of just over two activities. This figure is slightly lower than the typical figure found by other studies such as the ENGAGE research in Brighton and the Greater London Enterprise research in London, of an average of three activities per faith group.



However, visits to activities around the Region confirm that whilst a respondent may identify a single activity of “community centre”, this can in fact include many activities.

Partnership

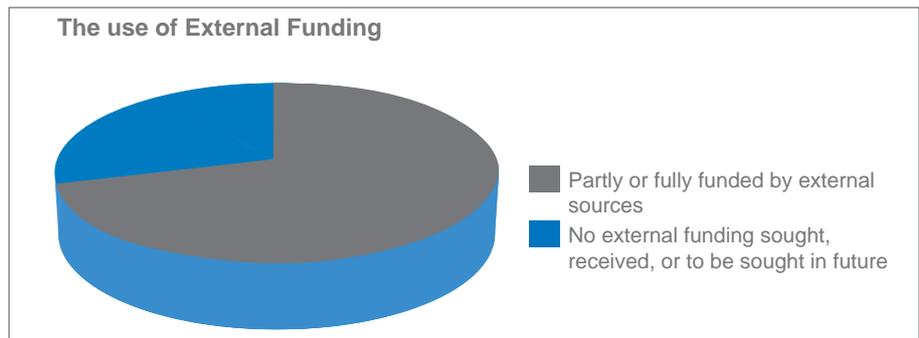
Just under half of the respondents (40%) stated that they were involved in partnership working.



Funding

This question was only answered by 72% of those who stated that they were involved in social action. It is impossible to tell whether those who did not respond to this question left it blank to indicate that no external funding had been sought, (even though the question did not specify *external* funding) or whether it had been left unanswered due to a range of other possible reasons. These include the possibility that the respondent did not know the answers or that the respondent felt that such information was confidential.

Of the respondents who answered the question about funding, 28% stated that all their work was funded from within their own faith group and that they had made no unsuccessful funding applications and that they did not envisage applying for outside funding in the future.



Of those who had sought external funding, the most common sources of funding were as follows:

Funding sources accessed by faith groups:

Funding Source	Number of Times Mentioned by Faith Groups
Faith Group external funding (eg. Church Urban Fund)	15
Local Authority	13
Trusts and Charities	8
European Funding	7
The Lottery	6
Local Employers	6
Children's Fund	2
UK Online	2

.....and various others that were only mentioned once.

The second part of the question asked respondents to list all the funding sources that their faith group had unsuccessfully tried to access. The results were as follows:

Funding sources unsuccessfully sought by faith groups;

Funding Source	Number of Times Mentioned by Faith Groups
Local Authority	11
Lottery	4
Trusts and Charities	6
Faith Group external funding	2
Local Employers and Organisations	4

From this it can be seen that the numbers of unsuccessful applications was, according to the survey, much lower than the number of successful applications. This is an issue that is considered in the previous chapter.

The final part of the question on funding asked respondents to list any funding sources their faith group was planning to access in the future. The results were as follows:

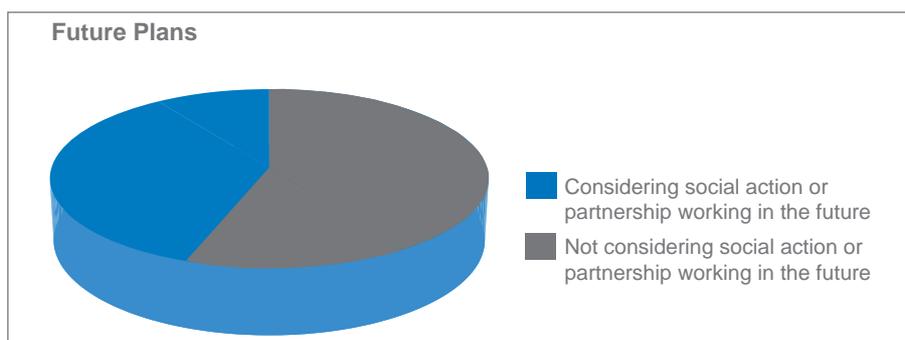
Funding sources that faith groups are considering accessing in the future:

Funding Source	Number of Times Mentioned by Faith Groups
Trusts and Charities	14
The Lottery	13
Local Authority	8
European Funding	3

.....and various others that were only mentioned once. Some faith groups showed a real awareness of funding sources when answering this question, using jargon accurately and mentioning small trusts and charities by name. Others used terms such as “community funding” or “European funding”. Three faith groups responded that they would consider “Any” source of funding in the future. One other responded “Any but the lottery”, a response that was also shared by some of those who were interviewed in the course of the research, and which is considered in more detail in the previous chapter.

Future plans

Of those respondents who were not currently involved in either social action or partnership working, 58% stated that they might be interested in doing so in the future.



Several respondents added hand-written notes stating that they would appreciate guidance on these matters or advice on funding. This suggests that there is an unmet need in these areas and that there might be scope for improved infrastructure or advice to assist faith groups who wish to get involved, or further involved, in either social action or partnership working.

The findings outlined in this section are broadly in line with those uncovered by ENGAGE as a result of their research amongst churches in Brighton and Hove. The SEEFF research found a slightly lower number of projects per faith group and a significantly higher percentage of faith groups that had accessed external funding. These differences might be explained by the fact that the Brighton and Hove research involved visiting most of the churches individually, thus leading to a higher response rate and more detailed findings on more churches. The Brighton and Hove research also only includes churches and not other faith groups.

The differences between how the ENGAGE/Shafesbury Society research and the SEEFF research were undertaken might explain the two variations in the findings as it seems likely that non-respondents to the SEEFF postal questionnaire might run more smaller projects with no external funding.

With these two exceptions, the ENGAGE/Shafesbury Society research uncovered similar and sometimes identical findings on issues such as partnership working, levels of engagement in social action and demand for future support in getting future projects and partnerships off the ground.

Case Studies -

Faith in Action

What?	<p>Kings Church, Hastings</p> <p>Kings Church in Hastings is a relatively new church, based in a modern industrial style building. Around 500 people meet there on a Sunday morning and additional get-togethers occur throughout the week. Kings Church runs a large and increasing range of activities that aim to tackle social need for people in Hastings and St Leonards. Although the Church itself is based in an affluent part of Hastings, its congregation come from all over the surrounding area, and the church's social action programme, whilst open to all, is aimed primarily at the socially excluded and people from more deprived areas.</p> <p>At present, activities run by the church include the following: <i>a) a monthly lunch club for elderly people, b) a Saturday morning Kids Club for children from local deprived estates, c) a pregnancy advice service. This is currently only running a very skeletal service, but advice is free and available to all who seek it, d) a twice-weekly parent and toddler group at a cost of £1 per family, e) a twice-weekly health promotion club for teenage girls, f) a fortnightly Friday evening youth sports club attended by approximately 400 young people each session.</i></p>
Why?	<p>Many of the projects were started as a result of the ideas of individual church members, many of whom lived in or near deprived areas of Hastings and who perceived social need. Before starting projects, needs are assessed by looking at information such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation statistics and the Local Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. Kings Church has a good relationship with the local voluntary and community sector and other organisations involved in regeneration and these relationships also provide a starting point and a framework for much of their work.</p>
Consultation and community involvement	<p>All the project leaders are local residents, and rely on local volunteers, not all of whom are Christians. The Church believes that working together with the Local Strategic Partnership, the Borough Council and other local organisations has brought benefits to their social action and has helped to challenge perceptions about faith groups. Those running the youth projects make a conscious point of keeping parents informed about what the young people do whilst at the Church and efforts are made to seek verbal feedback from families. At the parent and toddler group and the lunch club, volunteers sit amongst those attending and seek informal feedback and suggestions for improvement.</p>
Funding and partnership	<p>The Church has recently employed a Business Development Manager with the aim of tapping into external funding streams. This post is currently funded by the church. Most of the funding so far has come from church members. However the church has already accessed some local funding such as the Community Chest and has recently started marketing its facilities as a conference venue, which brings in funds from room hire.</p> <p>Kings Church has no formal partnership agreements at present. However, it does work informally with a number of local organisations and has a positive approach to entering into more formal partnership agreements in the future.</p>
Outputs, outcomes and added value	<p>Kings Church is situated on the outskirts of Hastings. All the public areas are accessible to the disabled and there are car parking facilities, which are being extended further. The church identified its added value to the community as including respite for parents, increased quality of life, social integration, community cohesion and sign posting to other organisations. Anonymous surveys completed by volunteers from both the parent and toddler group and the lunch club showed that all the respondents had been volunteering for over six months and intended to continue volunteering in the future. One volunteer added a hand-written note to the question asking why she volunteered at the lunch club stating, "just love it!" Anonymous</p>

surveys completed by parents attending the parent and toddler group showed the majority had been attending for over six months. All except two respondents rated the activity as “excellent” with the remaining two rating it as “good” and all respondents stating that they would miss the activity if it stopped. All the respondents intended to continue attending regularly in the future.

Anonymous surveys completed by those attending the lunch club showed that almost all had been attending for over six months and all except one intended to attend regularly in the future. All except two respondents rated the activity as “excellent” with the remaining two people rating it as “good”. Similarly all except two respondents stated that they would miss the activity “a lot” if it ceased with the remaining two stating that they would miss it “a bit”. Just over half of the respondents regularly attended church.

The survey responses also suggested that the activities of Kings Church were reaching those on low incomes or who were socially excluded. The majority of respondents attending the parent and toddler group had a total household income of less than £20,000 and some of those attending the lunch club were able to get out of their house once a week or less. The parent and toddler group is sufficiently popular to have a waiting list of those waiting to attend and the church always tries to fast track those people who are living in challenging or difficult circumstances.

Where next?

Kings Church constantly monitors its work and is looking to expand its activities, particularly its youth work. The church sees its main barrier as being access to the church building and plans to increase its use of a bus service to bring people to them and other ways of enabling access and improving outreach. The church also plans to improve its building in order to turn it into a popular conference and meeting venue as well as making the environment more pleasant for all those who attend. Other plans include widening its funding base and continuing to build positive relationships with both secular organisations and other churches and faith groups.

Dartford Community Counselling Service

What?

Dartford Community Counselling Centre (DCCC) was established in 2002 and offers a free and confidential counselling service to all people living in the Dartford and Gravesham areas on issues such as depression, bereavement, domestic violence, alcohol abuse, job-seeking and debt, as well as an email advice service to all. It currently operates out of offices to the rear of Emmanuel Pentecostal Church and has close links with the church. In addition to this work DCCC also works in schools on issues such as sex education and relationships and has recently established a self-help group for those affected by suicide. The Centre is a member of Advice UK, the UK’s largest network for independent and free advice centres.

Why?

DCCC started as a result of the belief that the “church needs to get out to where people need us, not stay within our four walls”. In addition, the Centre Manager’s experiences as a professional and as a volunteer on the boards of local voluntary and community organisations suggested that demand for free counselling exceeded the availability of such services.

Consultation and community involvement

The idea for DCCC was conceived some 2½ years prior to the opening and the formal planning took about a year. A survey was carried out in 2002, which covered over 100 faith groups and other organisations in order to determine what services were already being offered and to avoid duplication. A Community Audit has also been carried out in order to identify the needs of the local communities and contact was made with the local MP, local Councillors, the Health Authority and others. Members of the public have been surveyed quite extensively. Towards the end of 2003, when the Centre had been running for a year, a survey was carried out with one class in each year of a local secondary school in order to assess the needs of young people.

Funding and partnership

At the present time, DCCC is mainly funded by Emmanuel Pentecostal Church. However, outside funding has been obtained via a £5,000 grant from a Trust as well as a £2200 grant from the Urban Community Chest Fund which is being used to support the work in schools. There have also been donations from clients and others and the voluntary counsellors fund half their training costs. DCCC works together with CRUSE – the bereavement care charity, Gravesham Citizens Advice Bureau and the local Council for Voluntary Service. The Centre Manager at DCCC is on the board of local organisations and DCCC aims to have a good working relationship with the police, the local MP and others working in the local communities.

Outputs, outcomes and added value

In the first year of operations the Centre saw about 40 clients face-to-face and responded to over 300 people via the internet counselling service. These figures are expected to be much greater for the second year of operations. Although the Centre benefits from the financial and other support of the church, it is felt that the Centre's impact may currently be limited by the preconceptions of potential clients about a counselling service that is in the same building as a church. The impact may also be limited by the fact that the Centre's current location is not immediately obvious from the street, has limited nearby parking, difficult access and no access for the disabled. Counsellors are happy to visit the disabled and other clients in their own homes or see them on the ground floor of the church building, however disabled access remains an issue. Inside, the Centre is clean, quiet and welcoming. The main impact of the Centre appears to be the availability of a free counselling service, which takes some of the pressure off organisations such as the CAB. Informal feedback from clients appears to suggest that the service is appreciated and most clients continue attending for as long as their counsellor feels it is appropriate.

Where next?

DCCC's main aim for the coming year is to find new premises in order to try and solve the dual challenges presented by the current premises; accessibility and the possibility of clients being put off by the church setting. Other aims include becoming a registered charity in its own right, securing further funding and working with other faith groups. In addition the Centre plans to branch out into other areas of counselling, establish counselling services based in local schools and expand its services according to assessed need.

Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara

What?

The Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara is situated close to the centre of Gravesend and attracts hundreds of Sikhs from across North Kent, including Dartford. Such is the popularity of the Gurdwara that the community has outgrown its current building and is in the process of building a multi-million pound new Gurdwara and community centre close to the existing building. Activities offered by the Gurdwara mainly attract members of the Sikh community, but the activities are open to all. In addition to the main role of the Gurdwara as a place of worship, activities currently offered or hosted by the Gurdwara and by the Education Centre close to the Gurdwara include: *a) a day centre for the elderly run jointly with Kent County Council, b) the opening of the Gurdwara all day for food and hospitality and opportunities to learn about Sikhism, c) sports, language and education facilities, d) dance and music opportunities.*

In addition to these and other activities, members of the Gurdwara are actively involved in the local community, including membership of the local Council, and the Gurdwara contributes to food and other goods to a local hospice. Furthermore, the Gurdwara gets involved with local festivals and hosts events such as a recent police training session and a course which was run for local taxi drivers on the subject of men's health.

Why?

Gravesend has a large Sikh population and for many Sikhs the Gurdwara is at the centre of their everyday lives; providing opportunities for prayer, food and companionship. The sports and arts facilities provide an opportunity for children and adults to improve their health and their quality of life. Those spoken to expressed a belief that some Sikh women might be reluctant to access education facilities not connected with the Gurdwara and there was therefore a wish to ensure that nobody was denied opportunities to learn.

Consultation and community involvement

Members of the Gurdwara are active in many aspects of public life, for example as Councillors and as members of public bodies, thus enabling them to seek community input through this work. The involvement of the Gurdwara in local festivals also enables Sikhs to work together with non-Sikhs and to seek input and views. Some concerns were expressed by local residents about the building of the new Gurdwara on derelict land, and members of the Gurdwara made efforts to address these concerns and liaise with their new neighbours.

Funding and partnership

Virtually all the funding for the running costs of the current Gurdwara and the building costs of the new Gurdwara comes from donations. In addition, much of the labour on the new Gurdwara has been provided free of charge by Sikhs working in their spare time. Some external funding has been sought and the Gurdwara has been awarded money from Urban Thames Gateway Kent, which aims to promote social inclusion in deprived wards.

Outputs, outcomes and added value

The Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara is within walking distance of Gravesend town centre and members extend a warm welcome to everyone who attends. The Gurdwara is attended by hundreds of Sikhs and for many it forms the focal point of their lives and offers opportunities for socialising, sport, arts and eating good, fresh food. In addition, the ability of the Gurdwara to offer educational opportunities to people who might not otherwise access learning cannot be underestimated. The ethos of the Gurdwara is one of being active in the community and actively building relationships and sharing information with both secular organisations and other faith groups, which in turn improves the ability of the Gurdwara to have a positive impact.

Where next?

The new Gurdwara will include a gymnasium and playing fields to further extend the community facilities available to the people of Gravesend, create jobs and be a focal point for targeting services that are not always easily accessed by some members of the community. In addition, the Gurdwara plans to continue its work to meet the cultural, social and welfare needs of minority ethnic groups and all people in North Kent.

Preston Community Partnership

What?

Since 1999, Preston Community Partnership has operated out of a converted flat (the Barry Lawrence Centre) on a deprived, but well-maintained, social housing estate in the Anglican Parish of St John's in Ryde on the Isle of Wight. It has been described by the local Vicar as being "faith involved rather than faith-based". The Partnership is constantly evolving according to the needs of local people. At present, activities offered include: *a) affordable healthy food (cooked by local residents), b) job club, c) computer and internet access, d) credit union access, e) homework club.* The Partnership is Chaired by the local Vicar, and other church attendees are included amongst the management committee and volunteers who help run the Partnership. In addition, the church hall is used by the Partnership for some outreach work and activities that take up more room than is available at the Barry Lawrence Centre.

Why?

Preston Community Partnership operates across two of the most deprived wards in the South East Region and the need was apparent to many local residents, most notably the late Barry Lawrence, who was a member of the local Housing Association's Tenants Consultative Committee. At the same time, some members of St John's Parish Church felt called by God to get more involved in helping their local community, particularly in the areas of deprivation. The two groups and others came together with Medina Housing Association, who had plans to convert one of their flats into a Community Centre.

Consultation and community involvement

Prior to the Partnership starting, the local Housing Association carried out a community consultation and an Open Day was held. Since the Centre opened, surveys have also been carried out amongst local residents, although response rates have been quite low. One of the Partnership's employees regularly knocks on doors whilst delivering the Partnership's quarterly newsletter and at other times and makes a point of talking to people on the local estate in order to seek feedback and ideas for the future. Staff, volunteers and users of the Partnership also have displays at schools fairs and wear t-shirts advertising the Partnership whilst taking part in the annual Ryde Carnival. The Partnership is also currently producing a booklet about what community resources are available in the local area, which will be distributed amongst GP surgeries, libraries and other places.

Funding and partnership

Preston Community Partnership does not charge for hire of its rooms by local groups and individuals. However, the Partnership has a broad funding base and has accessed a wide range of funding streams. Currently, the main ongoing funding for the Partnership comes from SRB6. In addition to this, the computers for the UK Online Centre were provided by Government Office for the South East. The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers provided several thousand pounds to improve the environment immediately outside the Centre. Sure Start and the local Housing Association jointly funded an outside play area to the rear of the Centre. Other funding has been obtained from the Learning and Skills Council and the Police, who were pleased with the effect the Partnership was having on local crime rates. Further funding has been obtained from the Church Urban Fund and from the local Diocese and the Project Manager commented that the involvement of the church was actually helpful when it came to making funding applications because, he felt, it gave added status to the project and to the application.

Outputs, outcomes and added value

In the first year or so after the Centre opened, crime on the estate dropped by over 80%. The Partnership is not claiming all the credit for this drop, but the local police have expressed their firm belief that the Centre is having a positive impact. Children living in the area around the Centre are now able to use well-maintained outdoor play equipment and everyone living near to the Centre is able to access a wide range of resources and facilities. Some of the benefits are more specific. One of the staff members at the Centre, a local resident, was recruited using an open selection procedure after first being a user of the facilities and then working for some time as a volunteer at the Centre. Prior to obtaining his job at the Centre, he had been unemployed for a considerable period of time and the employment opportunities available through Preston Community Partnership had clearly had a positive impact upon this employee. It cannot be stated with any certainty that all of St John's Parish has benefited from the Partnership. Those running the Partnership were conscious that some people felt that the Centre was not for them and were concerned that some non-users may feel intimidated by a small minority of the existing users. In addition, the St John's Parish has traditionally been split into two distinct areas, and people living in the area where the Centre was not situated rarely use the facilities that are available. In the early months of the Centre being open there was some negative publicity and staffing difficulties. However, the recent history of the Centre has been very positive and staff and Management are working hard to identify and overcome any obstacles that are preventing the benefits of the Partnership from impacting upon all those who live in the two wards that make up St John's Parish.

Where next?

Preston Community Partnership is conscious that not everyone living in the surrounding roads wishes to come along to the existing base. Therefore the Partnership aims to build on existing outreach work and open a new Centre in the other part of the Parish and turn the church hall into a community centre. These plans, together with detached outreach work, should ensure that all the people living in the St John's Parish are easily able to access resources and support.

Thanet Churches Youth Project

What?

Thanet Churches Youth Project (TCYP) in Kent is currently virtually dormant but was, until recently, a vibrant and active project. Established in 1992 by Anglican Churches in Thanet, the project employed a detached youth worker. In 1995 TCYP became an ecumenical project. Following a needs audit, an ecumenical youth worker was employed to work with all the youth organisations in Thanet, to co-ordinate all the church youth work in Thanet, to support existing projects, to develop new projects and to ensure that contact was made with disaffected and excluded young people in Thanet. Following the rejection of a funding bid a decision was made to cease virtually all the work of TCYP.

Why?

TCYP started because several of the Anglican Churches in Thanet felt there was a need to co-ordinate the youth work that was already being carried out and perceived a need for more and better youth work.

Consultation and community involvement

Following the decision to involve all church denominations in Thanet, a needs audit was carried out in order to assess what services were required. In addition to this formal consultation, members of the Management Committee were involved with local organisations and were able to keep up-to-date with community needs both via this involvement and via their own experiences of living in Thanet. A regular newsletter was also produced in order to keep people informed about the work of TCYP.

Funding and partnership

Both the youth worker and the co-ordinator employed by TCYP were funded by Children in Need. The rejection by Children in Need of a further funding application for a full-time co-ordinator was the main factor in the Management Committee's decision to allow TCYP to lie virtually dormant whilst churches considered how to move forward. Other funding was obtained from local churches, charitable trusts and local businesses. The youth worker who is still employed by TCYP is funded by the Children's Fund.

TCYP worked in partnership with many local organisations and is a representative organisation on Thanet Youth Council.

Outputs, outcomes and added value

The aims, outputs and outcomes of TCYP were clearly outlined in regular reports. Activities included lunch-time clubs, after-school clubs, sporting activities, summer camps and a range of away-days. New youth groups were established in various churches, newsletters were produced, training was provided for youth workers and efforts were made to involve the families of the young people. The main added value of TCYP was its ability to enable churches to share resources and expertise, to co-ordinate their work and to build relationships with other organisations in Thanet.

Where next?

The management team has decided to put TCYP on hold with the exceptions of running a web-site, running a toy library and managing and securing continued funding for a part-time youth worker, working in the Newington area of Ramsgate. It appears that the main reasons for TCYP's dormant state are: the rejection of a funding bid, an insufficiently broad funding base and members of the Management Committee having the enthusiasm, but no longer the time, that was necessary. It appears that the Project was never able to fully re-start after the decision to take a year out to reflect on future work, although the possibility of TCYP growing again and employing more staff in the future has not been ruled out, subject to funding.

Brighton Buddhist Centre

What?

Brighton Buddhist Centre (BBC) offers courses and classes in meditation, Buddhism, tai chi and yoga for all levels of experience. Nobody is excluded from these classes on the basis of cost and most of those who attend are not practising Buddhists. The organisation has been a registered charity for 25 years and has taught meditation to many hundreds of people from Brighton and elsewhere in Sussex over this time. In addition to this work, which aims to improve people's quality of life and wellbeing, the Centre is also closely affiliated with two local shops, which run on ethical principles and partly fund the Centre.

Why?

The work of BBC was started as part of its members' belief that the principles of Buddhism and meditation should be available to all. The crucial motivating factor for the Centre's work is what the Centre believes to be the positive impact of meditation on people's health and emotional well-being. The classes also bring in valuable income that enables the Centre to keep its premises running.

Consultation and community involvement

BBC publicises its facilities via a web-site and a twice-yearly leaflet that is distributed through local businesses and other organisations. In addition, the exterior of the Centre displays posters advertising its facilities. The Centre is open for drop-in every weekday and much informal consultation is carried out during these times. Informal consultation, together with the fact that the organisation was outgrowing its previous premises, was a key factor in the decision a few years ago to move to new premises in the centre of the City, which have full disabled access, are accessible to more people and can accommodate more users. This move led to a dramatic rise in the number of people, both able-bodied and disabled, who use the facilities.

Funding and partnership

BBC was purchased through a combination of a mortgage, loans and donations from the affiliated shops. The Centre costs approximately £280 per day to run and those costs are met from a combination of voluntary donations, shop donations and income from the courses and classes. The Centre has never accessed external funding and is quite proud of its ability to self-fund. The possibility of accessing external funding has been considered in the past, but has always been considered too complex with too many strings attached. However, the Centre would not rule out the possibility of seeking external funding in order to maintain and improve its services in the future.

The Centre has no formal partnership agreements at present, but does work informally with local GPs and schools. The Centre did explore the possibility of working in partnership with a large international company a few years ago to teach meditation to staff, however this didn't progress because the company was wary of working with a religious group. The Centre is very interested in future partnership working and would like to find out more about this.

Outputs, outcomes and added value

BBC is situated in the centre of Brighton. It is fully accessible to the disabled, is brightly painted and offers a warm welcome to all those who walk through the door. The atmosphere inside is calm and friendly. The work of the Centre aims to improve people's physical and emotional wellbeing and users tend to come back again and again. Informal feedback from previous users include comments such as, "I don't come along any more, but I'm really glad you're there". Classes are run at times of the day convenient to users and there is also a drop-in time every day. The fact that the Centre runs so many popular and well-attended classes suggests that it does have a positive impact upon those who use the facilities. In addition, the work of the associated shops in Brighton supports ethical enterprise and also boost local employment opportunities.

Where next?

The ability of Brighton Buddhist Centre to extend its work is currently limited by financial constraints. However, finance permitting, the Centre would like to get involved with outreach work and with local inter-faith activity.

St Leonards Baptist Church

What?

Since 2002, St Leonards Baptist Church (SLBC) in the Borough of Hastings has run activities from the basement of a Victorian church, which attract people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The activities are run under the names of Chapel Park Community Centre and CP Online. Many of the users are asylum seekers and others are foreign language students, with users coming from a wide range of national, ethnic and faith backgrounds. The Church has formed a partnership with Hastings College to enable the college to hold classes at the Church. Activities currently offered include: *a) free computer and internet access, b) meeting place for young people in the evening, c) English language and other classes run by Hastings College, d) story-sack (story telling for all ages).*

The basement is currently open to the public approximately 35 hours per week, however the opening hours are not all pre-set, with the facilities being open according to demand and the availability of two part-time paid employees and of volunteers.

Why?

The social action work at SLBC initially started as a result of a member of the church who had visited a church elsewhere in the Region and had been impressed by the work that church was carrying out to tackle social need. The Minister and other members of the church shared his enthusiasm to reach out to the community and ensure that the church was not just open on Sundays. The church subsequently formed a link with Church in Society who were looking for places to install UK Online centres. The computers were installed towards the end of 2002 and it was the opening of this UK Online centre that provided the starting point for other activities in the church basement.

Consultation and community involvement

The Minister, the Centre Manager and many of the volunteers live in the local community and are in constant contact with local residents. Prior to the facilities being opened to the public, SLBC consulted with the local Neighbourhood Watch and other community groups. The only concern raised was by a close neighbour of the church who was concerned about noise, which has not turned out to be a problem.

SLBC has also publicised its events through local publications and has plans to leaflet the area, improve the board that is outside the church, make contact with Black and Minority Ethnic groups and make other efforts to increase publicity and seek feedback.

Funding and partnership

For part of each week the facilities are rented out to Hastings College and the money from this agreement is used to fund a part-time Centre Manager. This partnership agreement brings benefits to both SLBC who gain funding and Hastings College who gain facilities. Other funding has been obtained from several local community grants which have been spent on improving facilities, facilitating ongoing services and employing one of the volunteers as a paid part-time IT administrator. One of the grants from Hastings Borough Council was awarded in recognition of the Church's work with black and minority ethnic groups. The church is currently preparing to access other funding streams as there is a need to update the facilities, extend opening hours, install a lift, employ a cleaner, fund refreshments for those attending and address other needs that are not currently being met due to funding constraints.

In addition to the formal partnership with Hastings College, SLBC also works with Church in Society on the UK Online Centre, with Jobcentre Plus and other agencies for gaining and supporting volunteers. They are also working with Sussex Careers to provide an Introduction to Computers class for beginners. SLBC's experience of partnership working has been very positive, and the church values the opportunity to be able to draw on a wider range of resources.

Outputs, outcomes and added value

At the time the church was visited in the Summer of 2003, its facilities had a "footfall" attendance of approximately 60 people each week in addition to the use that is made of the facilities by church members and by a weekly Keep Fit class. The impact of the facilities was slightly limited by the lack of disabled access and the fact that the facilities were accessed via steep outside steps. However there are plans to provide disabled access as soon as funding is available. Once inside the welcome was warm and the office of the Centre Manager was accessible to all. In pride of place on the office wall was a letter from a Muslim man who thanks the "good Christian people of St Leonards" for the facilities, assistance and support at the church. Young people from countries including Sudan, Liberia and China were talking together and sharing their experiences.

The users of the facilities are primarily young men, because that group is heavily represented amongst the asylum seekers and foreign language students who attend the classes and also make use of the computers and other facilities. The users of the facilities spoke positively about the impact of SLBC upon their everyday lives. Those interviewed invariably spoke of a warm welcome, the opportunity to keep in touch with news from their home countries via the internet, the chance to mix with other people from other cultures and faiths and the opportunity to learn new skills. The work of SLBC also aims to have a positive impact upon community cohesion and it is apparent that the church's facilities provide an opportunity for people from different cultures and age groups to socialise, mix and learn.

SLBC also aims to have a positive impact upon its volunteers, not all of whom are Christians. Those volunteers who were spoken to, talked of companionship, fun and the chance to pass on and gain skills. SLBC particularly aims to provide on-going support to its volunteers, particularly the long-term unemployed.

Where next?

SLBC is embarking upon an expansion in the number of courses that are available at the church, the range of courses that are available and the number of hours that the church is open to members of the public, although these plans are subject to funding. One of the activities planned for the immediate future is to encourage people to take part in the BBC's initiative to build up an archive of World War Two stories and to possibly build up courses around this theme. The church also plans more community bridge-building activities such as inter-culture cookery, and plan to start opening up more to the general public at the same time as foreign language students and asylum seekers.

Conclusion

The research that has been carried out over the past year and described in this report is just a snapshot; a picture briefly captured of the work that is being carried out in communities across the South East. Many of the activities mentioned in this report have already changed dramatically since they were visited and almost all will change further over the coming months and years. It has been difficult to capture a moving picture in a report that is inevitably static. Furthermore, not all the faith groups that were visited have been featured in this report and space limitations mean that many excellent activities have not been mentioned by name. Amongst many others, the work of the Salvation Army in tackling abject poverty and the work of the Mothers Union in prison visiting and supporting families have not been given the space they would ideally deserve.

Furthermore, this research looks at just a few of the more deprived parts of the South East Region and it would be interesting to see whether faith groups in more affluent and more rural areas operate differently from those that have been studied here. It should also be borne in mind that people were far happier to talk about what had worked well than to talk about what had worked less well.

Nevertheless, the themes, data and findings that have emerged as a result of this research are important. They are important because it is clear there is a lot more going on than most people realise. They are important because faith groups are providing major resources in the form of money, buildings, expertise and volunteers. They are important because faith groups are working in a professional manner amongst some of the most deprived communities in the South East and building up expertise that would be the envy of many a regeneration specialist. Most of all, though, they are important because faith groups are in this for the long-term. They are at the heart of their communities. Many faith groups have been in their communities for hundreds of years and will still be there hundreds of years from now. Long-term problems require long-term solutions and faith groups are now ideally placed to work with others to provide those solutions.

This research cannot be concluded without considering what lessons can be learnt and what steps should be taken to implement these lessons. From the work that has been carried out it is apparent that the following three steps must be taken if faith-based social action is to be continued and developed:

- There is a need for more support for faith groups in order to provide advice and information on funding, partnership working, project management and other skills that are important to effective social action. SEEDA have already taken steps together with the Shaftesbury Society and its partners to provide support and advice for churches in Portsmouth, Brighton and Hove and Southampton on matters such as project development and funding opportunities. This is working well and there is a need for similar support across the Region and for all faiths.
- There is a need for an infrastructure networking organisation that will be able to put faith groups in touch with other faith groups elsewhere in the Region who are carrying out similar work, in order that people can avoid duplication, avoid mistakes, gain expertise and learn from what works.
- There is a need for faith groups to engage more with secular groups in order to break down barriers and build positive relationships of trust. Likewise, there is a need for secular organisations to improve religious literacy and work with faith groups to build understanding and ensure that those working to empower and serve communities are able to work together for the best possible results.

Overall the picture that has emerged from this research is a very positive one and one that proves that the work of faith groups cannot be ignored in future efforts to tackle social exclusion.

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Beyond Belief?

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A report by South East of England

*Faith Forum about faith based
regeneration activities - by Sarah Lewis*



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