

CHURCH IN ACTION:

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION



FEBRUARY 2015

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Methodology.....	1
1. Mission and social action	2
2. Identifying and responding to social issues	4
Identifying unmet needs.....	9
3. Activities being offered by churches	11
Activities to tackle food poverty.....	12
Activities to support credit unions.....	14
Leadership of activities.....	16
Working in partnership.....	16
4. Growth of church-based social action	18
Barriers to growth.....	18
Conclusion	21

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

Previous research by Church Urban Fund has found that, as churches seek to engage with and transform their local communities, they too are transformed. Those that are doing more to meet local needs are more likely to be outward-looking, have a deeper understanding of God's purpose, have improved relations within the church and the wider community, and to be growing.¹

This report reveals the scale and nature of Anglican social action in England. It does not capture the extensive work being done by churches of other denominations; however, we recognise that many of the activities of Anglican churches are delivered in close partnership with others and would not be possible without their commitment and support.

In sharing the results of our recent survey, we are able to highlight and celebrate the contribution that churches are already making to their local communities.

METHODOLOGY

This report is a joint research project by Church Urban Fund and the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Team, assisted by their Research and Statistics Division. In September 2014, we sent an online survey to 5,097 incumbents – the most senior members of staff in a parish or group of parishes – of which 1,812 took part, a response rate of 36%. Clergy were asked to respond to the questions in relation to their parish. For those with more than one parish, they were asked to refer to the parish in which they lived.

Our sample represents a broad sub-section of Church of England parishes and includes responses from every region, every size of church and across urban and rural locations. There is a slight skew towards larger churches and churches in London; however, not to the degree that we felt it necessary to re-weight the data.

In order to counter a potential bias towards parishes in deprived areas, or ones that are more involved in social action, the survey was sent out by the Church of England statistics team and clergy were encouraged to fill it in regardless of the level of their church activity.

This survey follows one conducted in December 2011, also by Church Urban Fund and the Church of England. Several of the questions from this initial survey were repeated in 2014. Exactly the same phrasing was used in both surveys, in order to allow comparison over time.

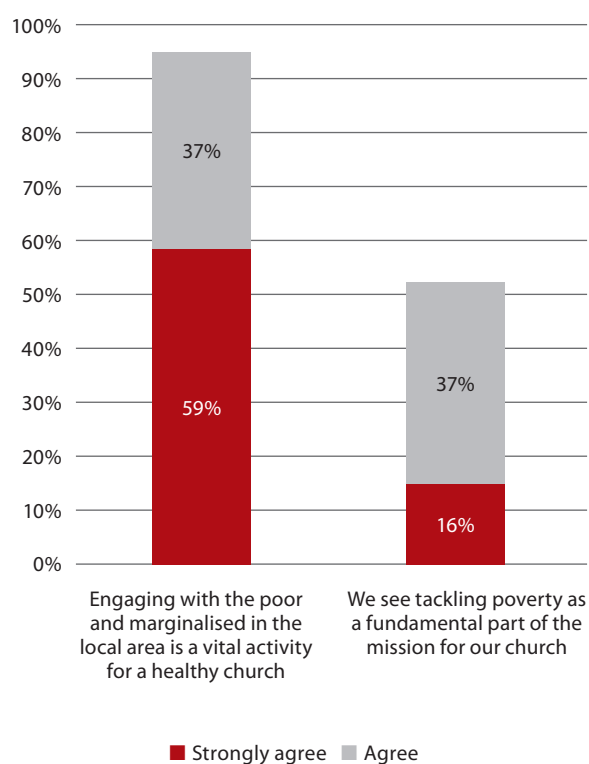
1. MISSION AND SOCIAL ACTION

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

It is interesting to note, however, that even when church leaders say that tackling poverty is not a fundamental part of their church’s mission, these churches are still very active in their communities: over half of these churches (53%) are addressing five or more social issues in their local area and two-thirds are involved in running a food bank.

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

Figure 1: Proportion of church leaders that agree, to some extent, with these two statements



A broader framework may be needed to describe and encompass the work that churches are doing in their communities. A report previously published by Church Urban Fund and Theos uses the word ‘neighbourliness’ to describe the way in which churches, alongside the direct services they offer, help to create ‘platforms’ and ‘spaces’ for people to connect with and get to know others.² The resulting relationships and social networks are crucial for building stronger, more resilient communities in which people can flourish. They can also help to increase the effectiveness of the services that churches deliver, as they are then offered in the context of relationships and personal support.

This kind of relationship building is a vital part of tackling poverty and yet is equally important in wealthier communities; indeed, it is a fundamental part of the Church’s mission. As such, perhaps the broader concept of ‘neighbourliness’ is one that more churches would identify with and connect to the work they are doing in their communities.

CASE STUDY: A CHURCH AT THE HEART OF ITS COMMUNITY

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

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

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

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

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

These activities have also changed the church community.

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

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



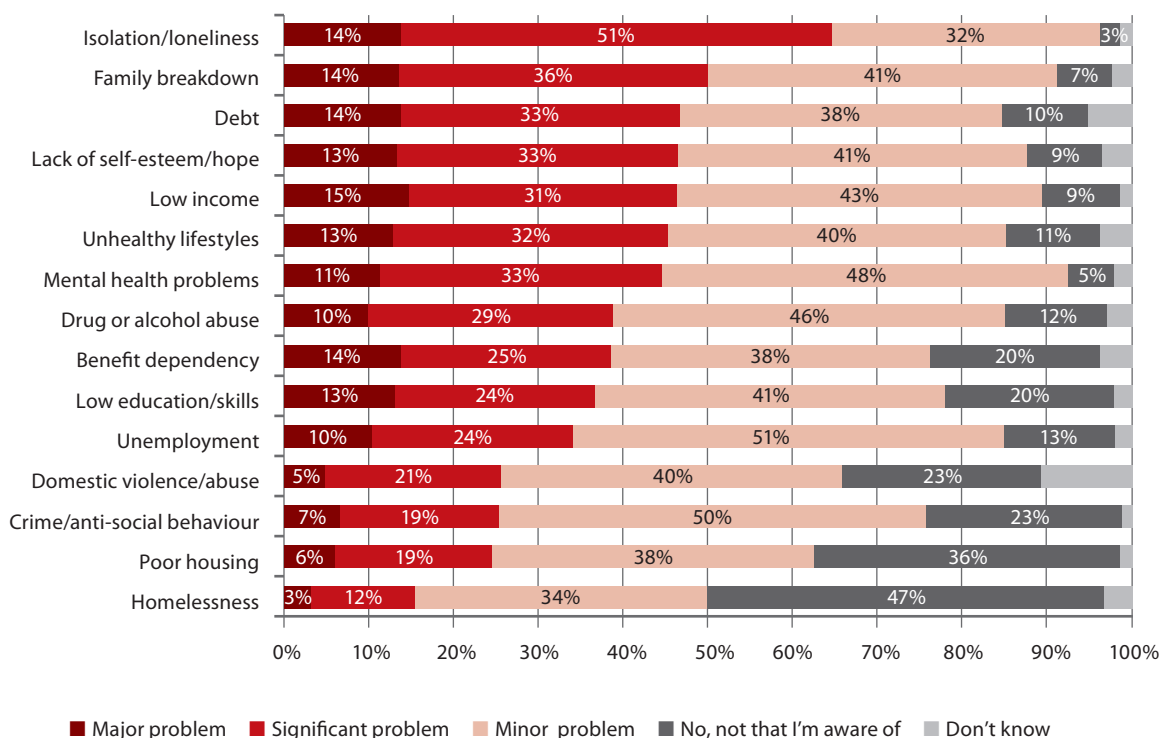
2. IDENTIFYING AND RESPONDING TO SOCIAL ISSUES

We asked church leaders about some of the potential social issues facing people in their community.³ Over 80% of churches reported at least one major or significant issue affecting their area, and a quarter of churches identified more than ten problems. The most commonly cited problems are isolation/loneliness, family breakdown, debt, lack of self-esteem and low income (see Figure 2).

The least commonly cited issues are homelessness, poor housing, crime, domestic violence and unemployment. This does not mean these issues are less important, but they tend to affect a smaller number of people and are often hidden from sight. These problems are also more concentrated in the most deprived areas: for example, poor housing and crime are listed as major or significant problems in two-thirds of the most deprived areas, but in less than 5% of the least deprived areas (see Figure 3).

All the issues we listed are more prevalent in deprived areas. This accords with the widely accepted view that poverty impacts on almost every aspect of people’s lives, including physical and mental health, family relationships, and social cohesion, as well material well-being. Social isolation is the one issue that is also seen to be a significant problem in the majority of wealthier areas (cited by 55% of leaders in the least deprived areas), but is still more common in the most deprived areas (81%).

Figure 2: Reported prevalence of social issues in parishes



CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

Figure 3: Proportion of church leaders that say these issues are major/significant problems in their parish, by level of parish deprivation

	20% least deprived parishes	Less deprived than average	Around the average	More deprived than average	20% most deprived parishes
Homelessness	1%	4%	9%	23%	41%
Poor housing	2%	6%	17%	35%	62%
Unemployment	3%	11%	25%	51%	78%
Crime	3%	7%	16%	32%	66%
Low education/skills	4%	12%	30%	54%	82%
Benefit dependency	7%	14%	30%	56%	85%
Domestic violence/abuse	8%	10%	16%	35%	56%
Low income	10%	22%	43%	68%	88%
Drug or alcohol abuse	15%	17%	31%	52%	77%
Unhealthy lifestyle	19%	21%	37%	62%	84%
Lack of self-esteem/hope	21%	26%	40%	64%	81%
Mental health problems	25%	22%	39%	59%	77%
Debt	26%	25%	38%	62%	82%
Family breakdown	31%	30%	44%	63%	81%
Isolation/loneliness	55%	57%	60%	71%	81%

In addition, there are some significant regional differences in needs. Certain problems are more commonly reported in London than elsewhere, such as isolation (71% of parishes), poor housing (43%), crime (37%) and homelessness (36%). Unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and low income are most prevalent in the North West, whilst family breakdown and unhealthy lifestyles are most prevalent in the West Midlands. All these problems are less common in the South East (outside London).

When we asked the same question in our survey three years ago, the results were broadly similar in terms of prevalence of issues. However, there has been an increase in the proportion of church leaders who say that social isolation is a major or significant problem in their area (up from 58% in 2011 to 64% in 2014), and likewise for poor housing (20% to 25%) and mental health problems (40% to 44%). At the same time, certain issues are now being reported by slightly fewer parishes than before. Unemployment, problem debt and crime are down (from 43% to 34%, 52% to 47%, and 31% to 25% respectively), which matches wider social trends.⁴ However, an increase in interest rates could significantly increase the number of people with debt-related problems in the next few years.⁵

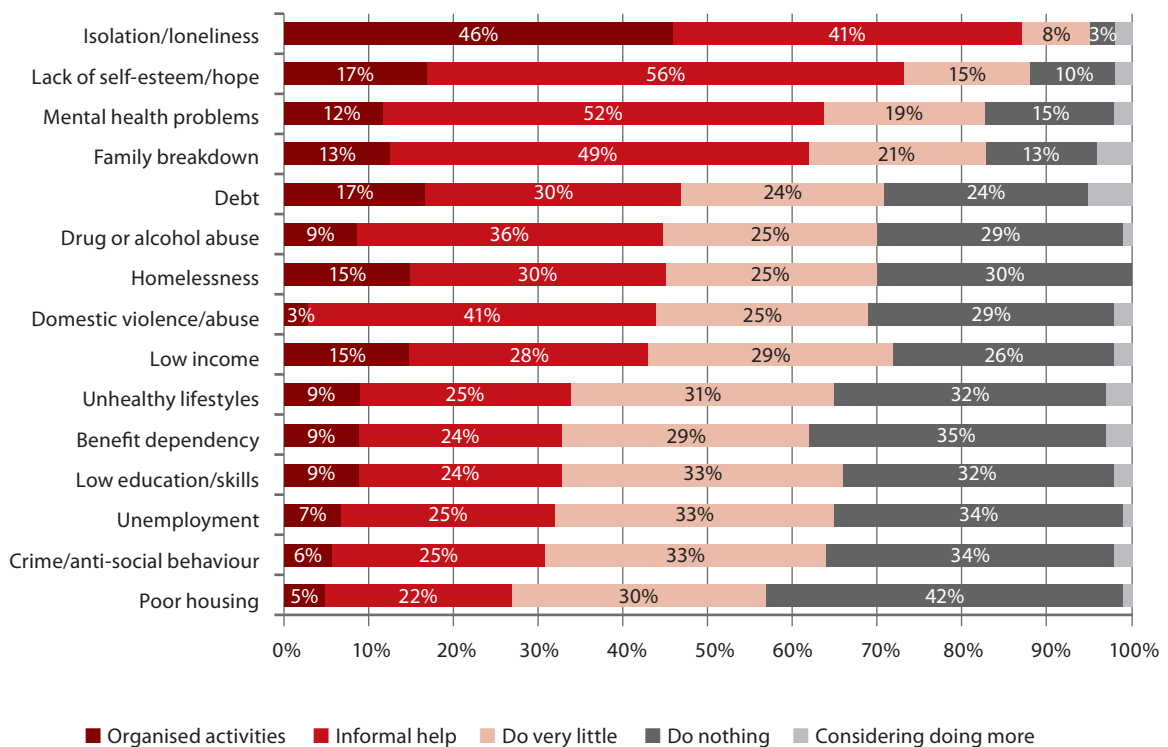
SOCIAL ISSUES BEING ADDRESSED

The vast majority of churches, more than 90%, are addressing at least one of these social issues in their local area through the provision of organised activities or informal support. On average churches are addressing seven local issues, and a third are tackling nine or more. The issues that churches are doing most to respond to are: isolation/loneliness, lack of self-esteem, mental health problems and family breakdown (see Figure 4). These are all issues where the church’s focus on relationship building and pastoral care is a particular strength. Churches are least likely to be responding to issues of poor housing, crime and unemployment, perhaps because these issues require more specialist responses.

Almost half (46%) of churches are running organised activities to tackle social isolation. At a time when Britain has been voted the loneliness capital of Europe⁶ and when one in ten adults say they have no close friends⁷, this work is absolutely crucial. As well as regular Sunday services, churches have traditionally been, and remain, places where people can gather and get to know one another. Whether it is through holiday clubs, youth groups, parent-toddler groups or lunch clubs, churches help to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Churches also offer a significant amount of organised activity to tackle debt, low income and homelessness. In each of these cases, Christian charities have developed effective models for addressing these needs that make it easier for churches to engage, including Christians Against Poverty/Community Money Advice debt centres, Trussell Trust food banks, and Housing Justice’s ‘Shelter in a Pack’.

Figure 4: Extent to which churches serve people in the parish experiencing each of the following issues



Beyond these organised activities, most churches are involved in tackling social issues through informal support. Even though much of this activity goes unnoticed, it should not be undervalued. Through fostering social networks, friendship groups and family life, particularly for those who may otherwise be excluded, churches help to provide the 'glue' that binds people together and that is vital for building healthy, resilient communities.

Very few churches (7%) are failing to address any social issues in their community. The most active churches are disproportionately found in the most deprived areas, where nearly half are addressing nine or more social issues. Urban parishes are generally more active than rural parishes (see Figure 5). In both cases, this reflects at least in part the fact that there are fewer identified needs in less deprived and more rural areas. Larger churches are generally more active, but many smaller churches are also very actively involved in meeting a wide range of social needs in their local community.

Churches are helping to meet many of the same local needs as they were three years ago when our last survey was carried out. The only significant change is that churches are now doing more – primarily through organised activities – to tackle low income, benefit dependency, housing problems and debt. This is most likely in response to economic austerity and the squeeze on people's incomes due to stagnating wages and rising prices. At the same time, there has been a small reduction in the proportion of churches saying they help to address family breakdown and low self-esteem.

CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

Figure 5: Level of church activity by area and church size

	Not addressing any local issues	Local activity churches: 1-4 local issues being addressed	Medium activity churches: 5-8 local needs being addressed	High activity churches: 9 or more local issues being addressed
Region*:				
East Midlands	7%	36%	29%	28%
East of England	6%	32%	30%	33%
London	3%	15%	30%	51%
North West	8%	30%	27%	35%
South East	7%	27%	35%	31%
South West	6%	27%	30%	37%
West Midlands	10%	24%	33%	34%
Yorkshire & Humberside	8%	26%	26%	41%
Location:				
Rural	8%	35%	31%	26%
Town	6%	25%	32%	38%
Urban	6%	19%	30%	44%
Deprivation:				
Least deprived 20%	6%	35%	33%	27%
Less deprived than average	8%	37%	30%	25%
About average	8%	26%	30%	36%
More deprived than average	4%	24%	32%	40%
Most deprived 20%	8%	16%	30%	46%
Congregation size:				
Less than 100	9%	33%	27%	31%
100-200	7%	26%	31%	35%
200 or more	4%	21%	36%	39%
All churches:	7%	27%	31%	35%

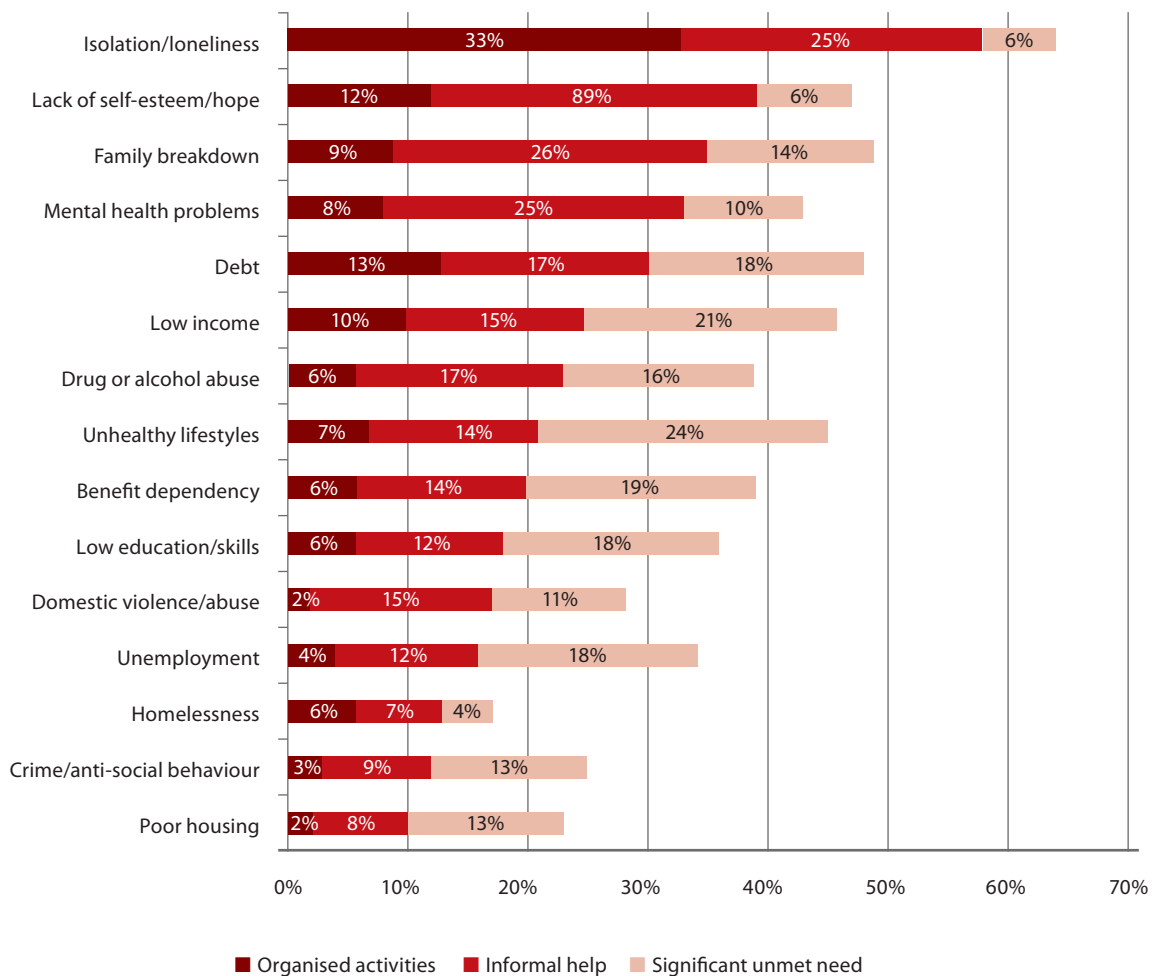
*Sample size for North East was too small to report.

IDENTIFYING UNMET NEEDS

Previous qualitative research by Church Urban Fund has shown that the churches that are making a real impact have made a conscious effort to understand and respond to the particular needs they see in their local communities. With this in mind, Figure 6 below looks at what, if anything, churches are doing to respond to the issues that church leaders identified as a major or significant problem in their area. For example, 6% of churches that identified drug or alcohol abuse as a major or significant issue in their area are offering organised activities to combat the problem, 17% are offering informal help, and 16% are doing little or nothing in response to an identified need.

Of the problems listed here, the single biggest unmet need is unhealthy lifestyles, followed by low income, benefit dependency, debt, low education and unemployment. In each case, around a fifth of clergy identified these as major or significant needs in their community but said that their church was currently doing little or nothing to address that need.

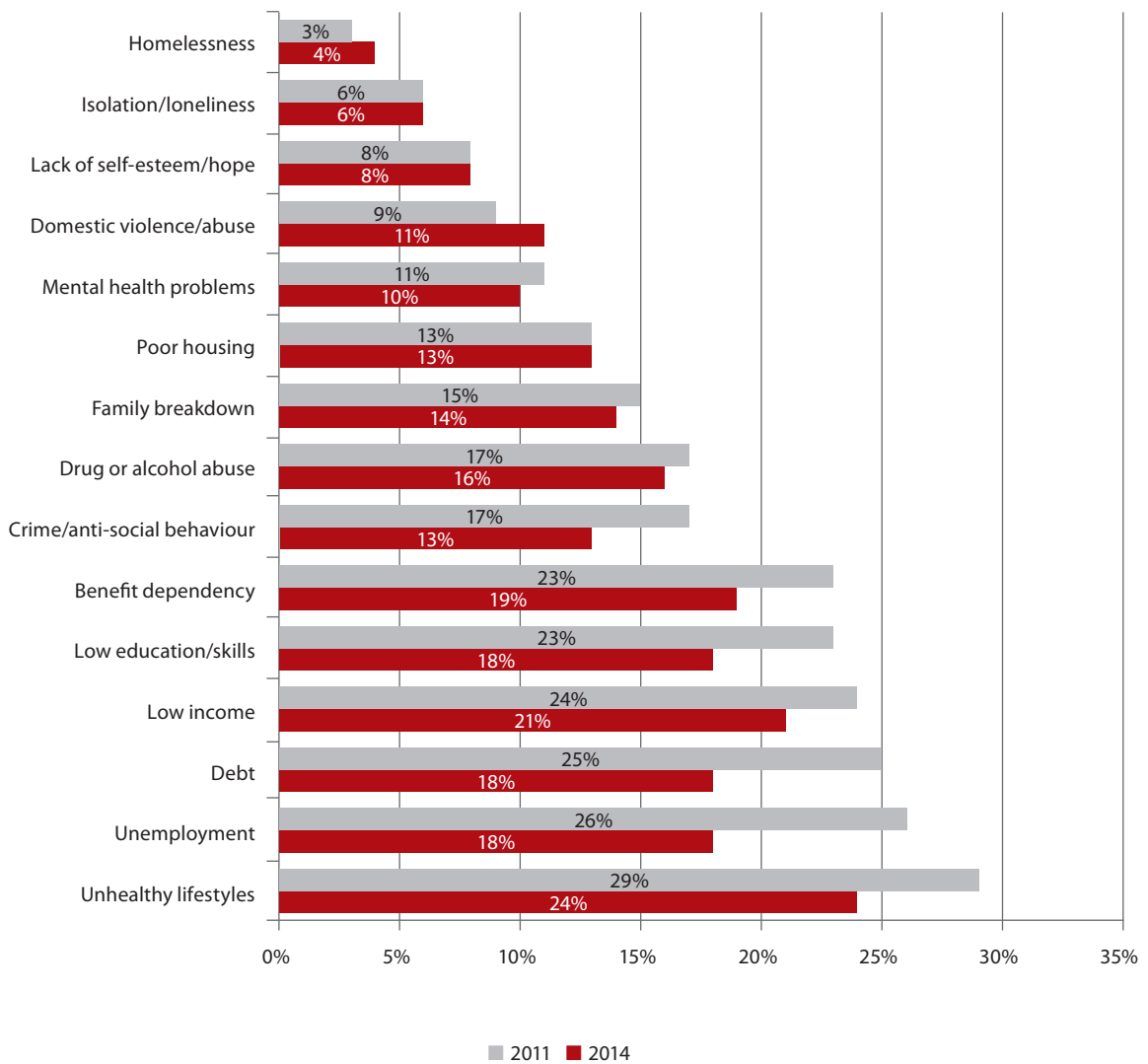
Figure 6: Church responses to major and significant identified needs in their community
(% of all churches identifying major or significant local needs)



CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

Compared with three years ago, there has been a marked reduction in the extent of unmet need, either because the level of perceived need has declined (as in the case of unemployment) or because churches are doing more to meet these needs (as in the case of debt and benefit dependency). In the case of social isolation and mental health problems, churches have increased their provision in response to rising need, so the level of unmet need has remained at about the same level (see Figure 7). This is perhaps a surprising finding in the context of austerity, and at a time when many other voluntary organisations are struggling to keep up with rising demand for their services.

Figure 7: Extent of unmet needs, 2011 and 2014 (% of churches not currently offering a response to a significant local need)



3. ACTIVITIES BEING OFFERED BY CHURCHES

As well as asking clergy how their churches were addressing particular social needs, we asked whether they were involved in offering specific activities (the full list is shown in Figure 8). The responses reveal, once again, the sheer scale of church engagement with local communities: 76% run activities in local schools, 66% help with food banks, 60% offer parent and toddler groups and 53% organise lunch clubs or drop-ins.

An astounding 92% of churches are involved in at least one of the activities listed and many churches offer multiple activities: 67% run four or more and 28% more than seven. Congregation size, and the more limited resources that exist within smaller churches, appears to be the strongest limiting factor in the number of these activities run by churches: 48% of churches with congregations of over 300 people run seven or more activities, compared with 15% of those with congregations of fewer than 50 people.

Figure 8: Proportion of churches involved in offering specific activities

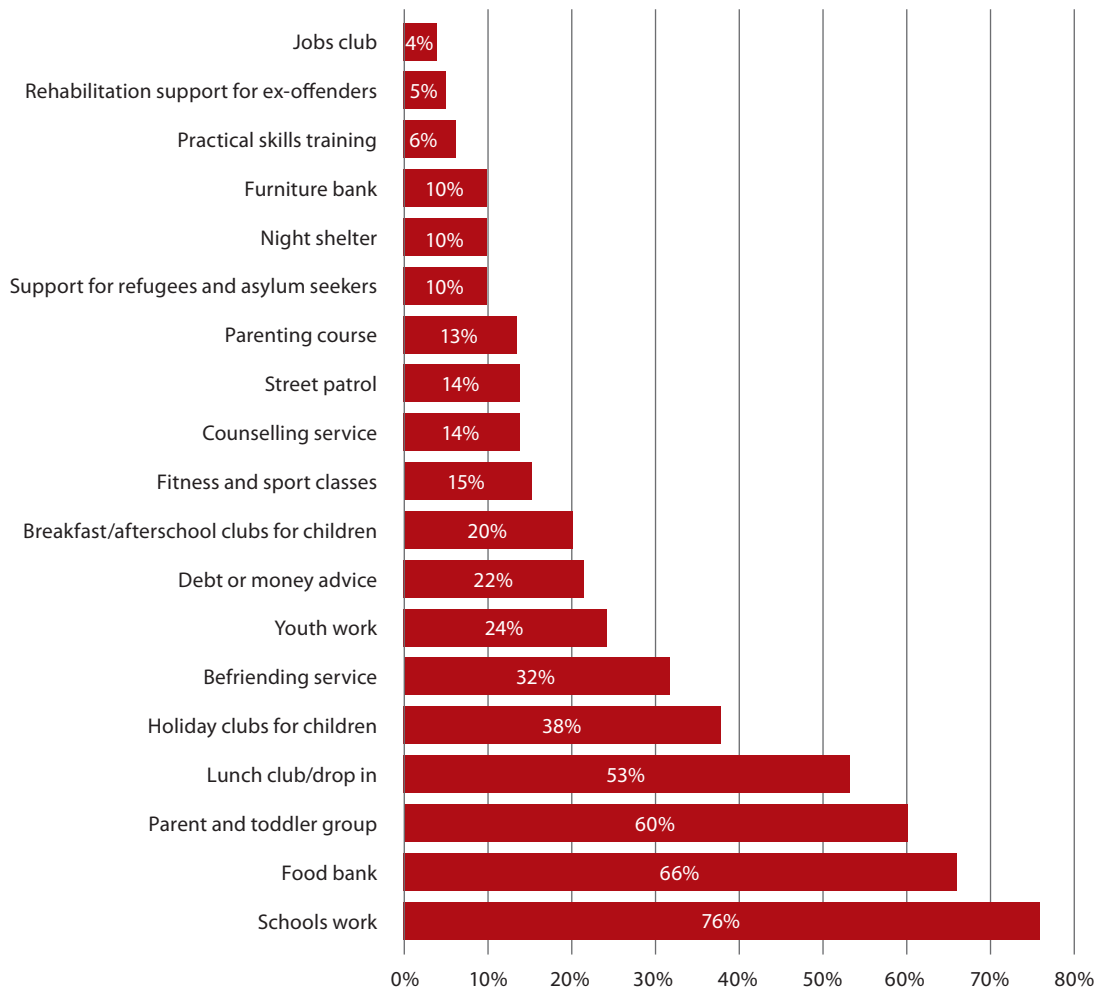
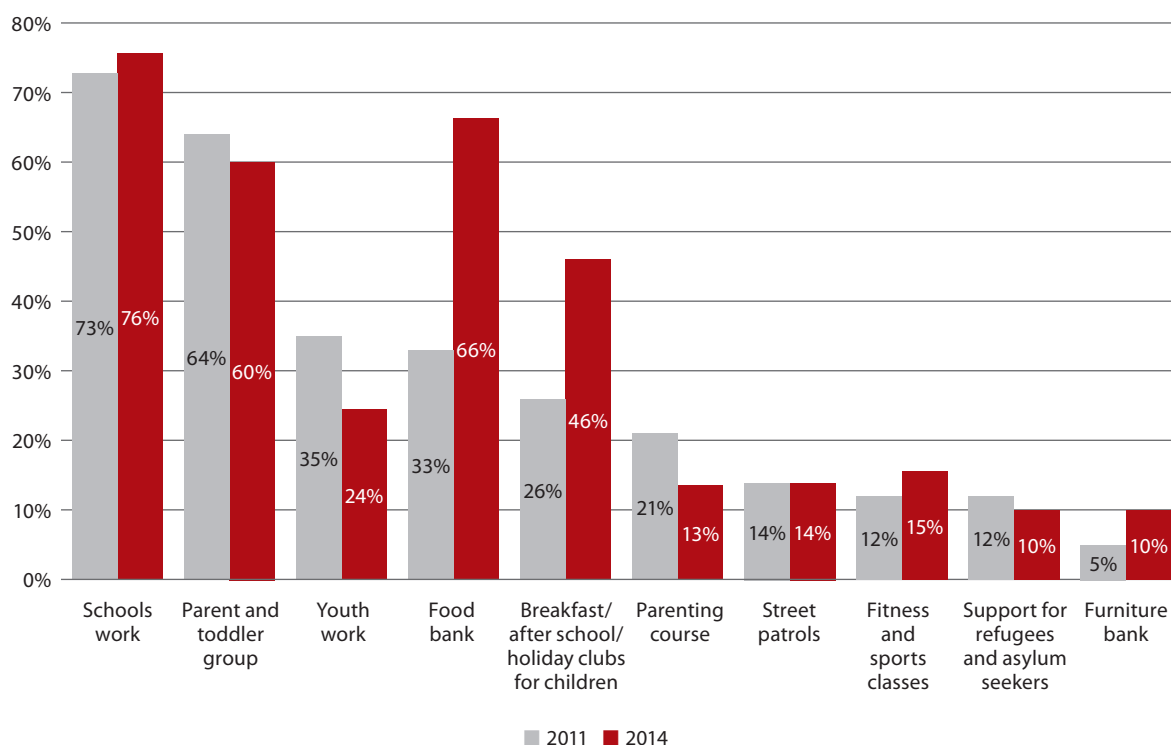


Figure 9: Comparison of church activities in 2011 and 2014



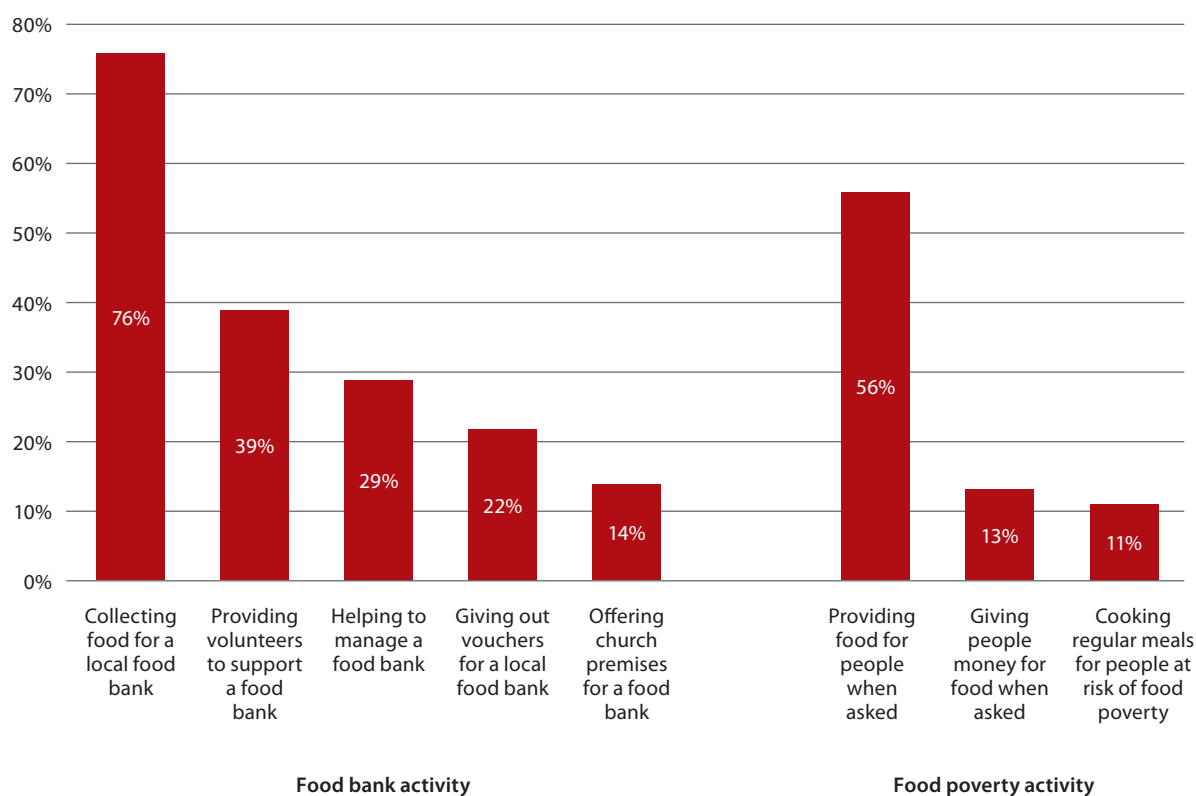
The nature of church-based activities has not changed significantly since our last survey three years ago, with a few notable exceptions. Firstly, far more churches report that they are now involved in running food banks – the proportion involved has doubled from 33% in 2011 to 66% in 2014 (see more below). Secondly, the proportion of churches offering activities for children – either breakfast clubs, after schools clubs, or holiday activities – has risen from 26% in 2011 to 46% in 2014.⁸ Thirdly, the number of churches offering youth work and parenting courses has dropped, possibly due to a reduction in the availability of statutory or grant funding.

ACTIVITIES TO TACKLE FOOD POVERTY

Given the growth of church-based food banks in the last three years, we wanted to explore this area of work further. We asked clergy which, if any, of a list of activities is their church involved in to help tackle food poverty.

We found that 76% of churches collect food for a local food bank, 39% provide volunteers, 29% help to manage one, 22% give out vouchers and 14% offer the use of their premises. Grouping all of these activities together gives a total of 81% of churches involved with food banks in one or more ways.⁹ Support for food banks is widespread across all regions and communities, including rural and less deprived areas.

Figure 10: Percentage of churches involved in activities related to food banks and food poverty



Five in ten of the food banks supported by churches are Trussell Trust food banks, while four in ten are independent. The remainder are run by other food bank networks or are informally organised food cupboards.

We also found that many churches are involved in efforts to tackle food poverty in other ways than through supporting food banks. For example, 56% offer people food informally when asked, 13% give people money for food and 11% of churches offer regular meals for people at risk of food poverty. Including all these different activities, nearly nine in ten churches (87%) are doing something to tackle food poverty in this country.

Many churches that are helping to manage food banks also offer additional community services: 63% run lunch clubs or drop-in cafes, 40% offer debt or money advice services, 17% run furniture banks, 11% offer practical skills training and 6% run jobs clubs.

This is evidence that the recently advocated 'Food Bank Plus' model (where food banks acts as an 'integral part of local hubs') already exists to a certain degree.¹⁰ According to this model, food banks that also offer advice, advocacy or training services can help to act as 'gateways' to resolve more deep-seated social issues. The case study below shows how a food bank in Middlesbrough is providing a range of services aimed at tackling the root causes of food poverty. However, it is worth noting that just because a church is running both a food bank and a debt advice service does not necessarily mean that the two are as well integrated as they would need to be to effectively offer this kind of holistic response.

FOOD BANKS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT CREDIT UNIONS

Similarly, given the Archbishop of Canterbury's public support for credit unions, we wanted to explore clergy's knowledge and awareness of credit unions and to find out the extent to which they are involved in supporting them, both personally and through their church.

Church leaders report a very high level of personal awareness and understanding of credit unions – 71% say they know what credit unions are and how they work. This reflects a far higher level of understanding than amongst the general population where just 15% say they know a great deal or a fair amount about credit unions.¹¹ However, just 22% of clergy believe that many in their congregation would know what credit unions are and how they work, showing that there is still work to be done in raising awareness of credit unions amongst churchgoers.

CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

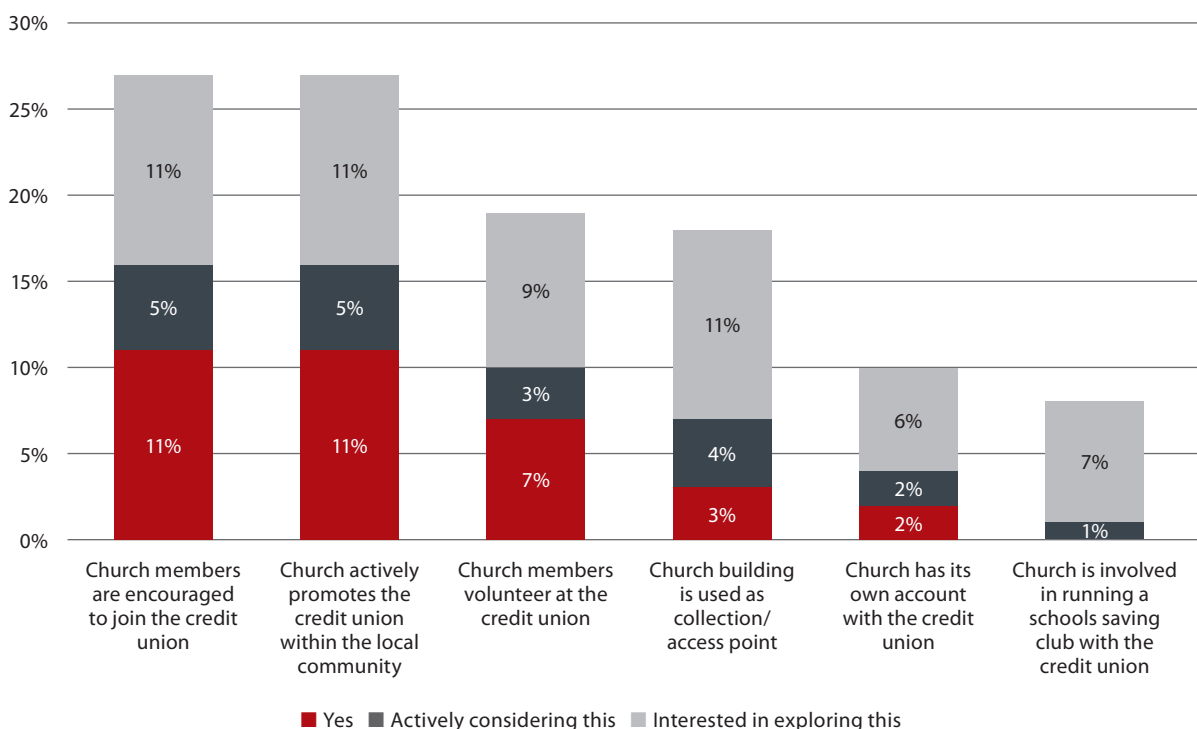
In terms of membership, 6% of church leaders are already members of a credit union – double the national rate of membership.¹² A fifth (20%) would actively consider becoming a member and almost half (46%) would consider becoming a member, but feel they would need to know more. The launch of the Churches’ Mutual Credit Union in February will offer the benefits of credit union membership to all clergy and church employees, as well as showing that the Church is walking the walk, as well as talking the talk, of ethical finance.

It is important to note that activities relating to credit unions, money and debt are seen by the majority of church leaders as a core part of mission – 79% agree that ‘helping people to manage their money wisely is an important part of the Church’s mission’. These attitudes are reflected in the activities churches are offering.

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

Churches in the 20% most deprived areas are more likely to express an interest in supporting a credit union, than those in the 20% least deprived – 41% compared to 21%. This suggests that churches in deprived areas are more aware of the need for credit unions. It could also indicate that credit unions are still struggling to overcome their reputation as the ‘poor man’s bank’ and will need to work harder to attract customers in wealthier areas, in order to become financially sustainable. Here the Church can help by encouraging a broad mix of people to join credit unions, including people who can afford to save and borrow larger amounts to balance out smaller, riskier loans.

Figure 11: Church activities in support of credit unions



LEADERSHIP OF ACTIVITIES

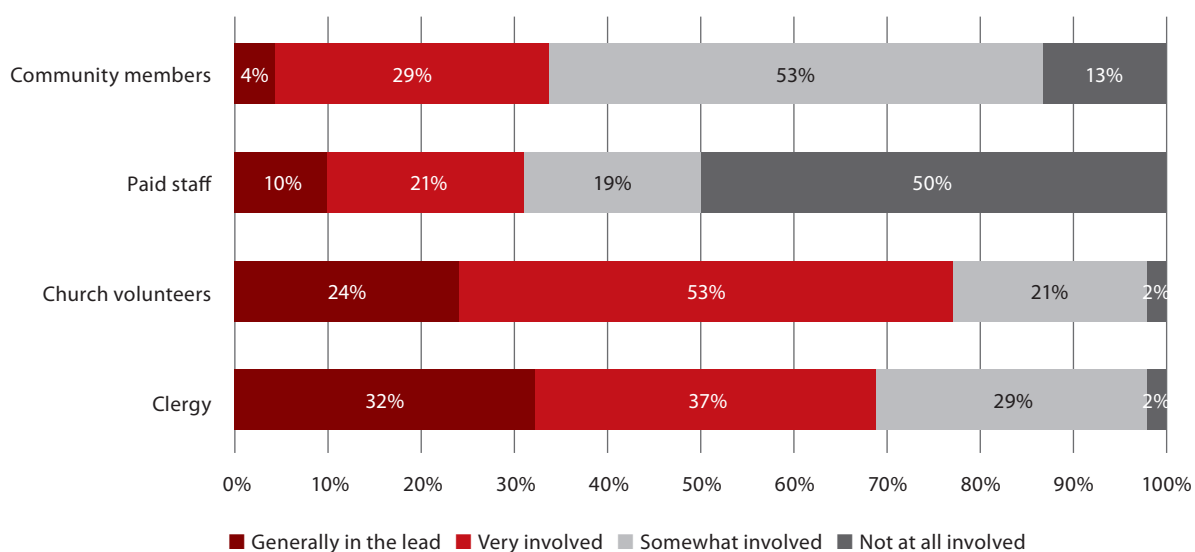
Overall, clergy tend to lead the activities offered by their church in the community – 32% of clergy said they are generally in the lead and 37% said they were very involved in these activities (see Figure 9). There is also a fairly strong lay leadership involved – volunteers lead the activities in 24% of churches and are very involved in 53% of churches. In only 4% of churches are other community members involved in leading activities.

The proportion of paid staff involved in leading activities is also low at just 10%. This may be because most churches do not have any paid staff other than the clergy or have such small capacity amongst their paid staff that they tend to focus on administrative tasks.

We also asked clergy about the proportion of their congregation that is actively involved in their activities. Just 12% said that the majority or all of their congregation is involved in the activities. In most churches, the activities are led by a significant minority of the church congregation (43%) or a small group of congregants (39%).

Taken together, these two sets of results suggest that the bulk of the responsibility for these activities lies with the clergy and small groups of committed volunteers. As we see below, lack of leadership is perceived to be a real barrier to doing more in the community.

Figure 12: Degree of involvement of different groups in church activities



WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The role that churches are able to play in their community is determined, to a large extent, by the relationships they hold with other local institutions. Close relationships often create opportunities for joint work, as well as stimulate the cross-fertilisation of ideas and resources. As such, we wanted to explore the relationships that churches have with other institutions in their community and did so by asking respondents to describe their relationship with the institutions listed in Figure 13.

CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

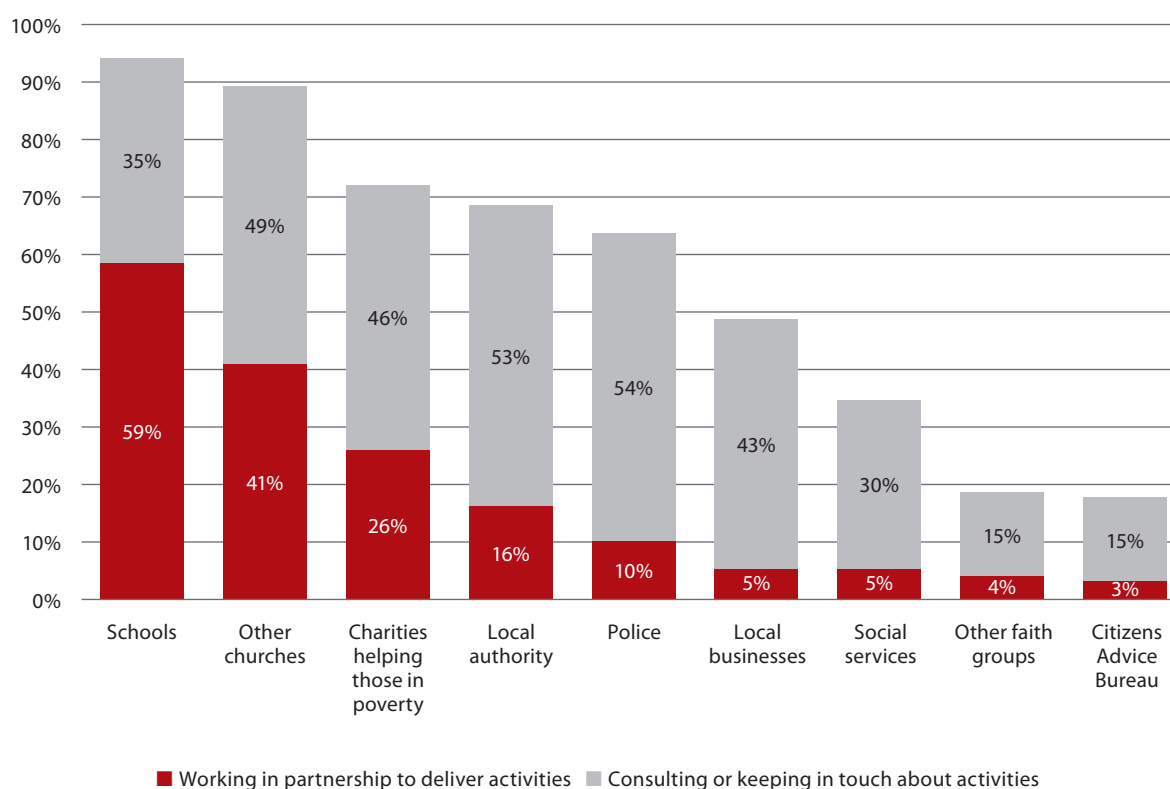
We found that 77% of churches are working in partnership with at least one external organisation in order to deliver joint activities, and that the most common partner is a local school. Given the institutional links between the Church of England and church schools, the high proportion of parishes with active church-school partnerships (59%) is perhaps unsurprising. When we exclude schools from these results, the proportion of churches working with at least one external partner falls to 58%.

The most common partner, other than schools, is another church, with 41% of parish churches delivering activities with other churches. Additionally, 49% of respondents said that they consult with other churches and keep in touch about activities. This signifies that nine in ten church leaders feel they have a good relationship with other congregations and in many cases are working constructively together. This is a very encouraging result.

Our results show that churches in urban areas are more likely to be working in partnership with other churches (45% compared to 36%) and charities supporting people living in poverty (33% compared to 18%). These results may be explained by the higher number of partnership opportunities offered by an urban environment.

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

Figure 13: Proportion of churches working in partnership or consulting with others



4. GROWTH OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

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

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

BARRIERS TO GROWTH

We wanted to understand more about the factors that limit the growth of church-based social action and so asked respondents the extent to which specific factors prevented their church from doing more to help those affected by poverty in their local area. Figure 14 shows the percentage of respondents that said individual factors were preventing them from doing more to a 'large extent' and 'to some extent'.

Despite the already high levels of volunteering amongst churchgoers, the primary barrier to further growth of activities, identified by 95% of respondents, is a lack of volunteers.¹³ Given that 78% of respondents also point to a lack of passion for action within the church, we can assume that this is one factor in the shortage of volunteer manpower. As we know, however, the reasons why churches struggle to recruit volunteers are complex.

Mobilising people to take action is crucial if a church is to continue to be active in its community. The final report of the Church Growth Research Programme says that 'a church is more likely to decline if the number of volunteers is limited and roles are not rotated'.¹⁴ Reliance on a small group of volunteers (which is the case in the majority of churches, as we saw above) can lead to stagnation, whereas a church that brings younger members and new members into new and varying roles is more like to stay vibrant and to grow.

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

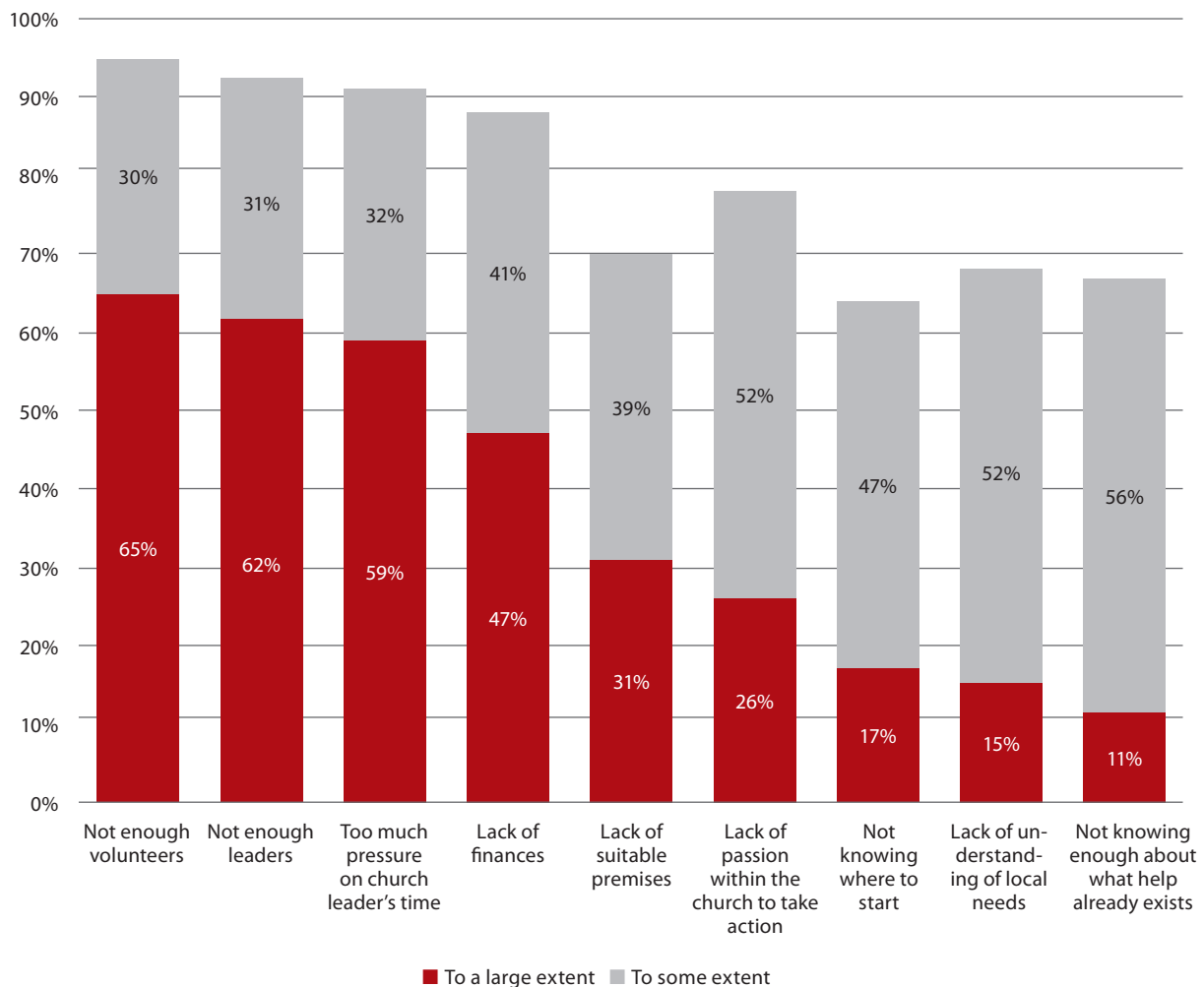
CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTION

The secondary barrier to growth is a lack of leaders – identified by 93% of respondents. This factor is undoubtedly connected to the first, as new leaders are often trained up when new volunteers are brought in. Investment in new volunteers and leaders would also relieve the pressure on the church leader’s time – a significant factor, according to 92% of respondents, in preventing them doing more in the community.

Lack of finances is also a problem for the majority of churches. Given that just 25% of churches say that they receive grants from external sources to help fund their activities, it is possible that more could be done to secure funding from sources external to the church congregation.

Fewer clergy said that ‘not knowing where to start’, a ‘lack of understanding local needs’ and a ‘lack of knowledge about what help already exists’ were significant barriers to growth. However, in their responses to another question, almost six in ten (57%) clergy say that although they would like to do more in their community, they would need support and advice from others to do so. This is particularly true of churches in the most deprived parishes – 71% of whom said that they would like more support, compared to 46% in the least deprived parishes.

Figure 14: Barriers to growing church-based social action



This desire for support is paralleled by a certain reluctance to take risks. Less than a third (29%) of vicars say they have stretched themselves to help those affected by poverty. This tendency to 'play it safe' is a real barrier to growth as those who are more willing to take risks tend to be doing more in their communities: 50% of those addressing nine or more social issues say they have taken risks compared to just 10% of those addressing fewer than five.

These results suggest that although clergy are fairly confident in their own knowledge and understanding of local issues, they nonetheless need support and encouragement to try new approaches and to stretch themselves in their efforts to tackle poverty.

MOBILISING VOLUNTEERS TO TAKE ACTION

For the last two years, Churches Together in the Penzance Area (CTIPA), has been running 'The Giving Shop'. Based in the Wharfside shopping centre in Penzance, this shop encourages members of the public to drop off their unwanted goods which are then passed onto local church-run projects including the food bank, street pastors, breakfast project and women's refuge.

The shop is open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 4pm and relies on a team over 80 volunteers.

'Most of the volunteers come to us through CTIPA, but others are just interested in the project and want to get involved,' says David Smith, General Co-ordinator of CTIPA, 'Some have been homeless themselves and would like to offer something back to their community.

'All of our volunteers are trained to manage the donations, but they're also encouraged to offer anyone who comes through the door a cup of tea or coffee. They spend a lot of their time listening to people who are lonely or advising people on where they could get further support. Most of our volunteers are 50+ so they have a great deal of life experience and professional expertise to offer people.

'We've been able to grow such a large team because we started with a nucleus of very committed volunteers and an activity that has generated a lot of enthusiasm and excitement in the community. However, we do struggle to get younger people involved and we're trying to do something about that at the moment.'

The Giving Shop and its team of volunteers is also having an impact on the churches involved.

'It was fantastic to see some of the volunteers who don't normally come to church, come along to the Christingle service this year. I think that's the result of being part of the team, getting to know people and then being invited along to a service. It's wonderful.'



CONCLUSION

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

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

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Growing Church through Social Action*, Church Urban Fund, 2012
- 2 *Good Neighbours: How churches help communities flourish*, Church Urban Fund and Theos, 2014
- 3 These issues were identified as the most important issues affecting local communities in a previous survey of project workers supported by Church Urban Fund, referenced in *Growing Church Through Social Action 2012*
- 4 The UK unemployment rate fell from 8.3% of the economically active population in Aug-Oct 2011 to 6.0% in Aug-Oct 2014 (Labour Market Statistics). The number of new debt problems dealt with by Citizens Advice Bureaux in England and Wales fell from 8,652 every working day in the year ending September 2011 to 6,389 a day in the year ending September 2014 (Money Statistics). According to the latest crime statistics, the total number of incidents of crime against households and resident adults in England and Wales fell from 9.7m for the year ending June 2011 to 7.1m for the year ending June 2014 (Crime in England and Wales).
- 5 See, for example, the Resolution Foundation report: 'Closer to the Edge? Prospects for household debt repayments as interest rates rise' (2013)
- 6 Office of National Statistics survey reported in the Telegraph, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1oGmmEg>
- 7 Relate survey reported in the Independent, 2014 <http://ind.pn/1kyh0uy>
- 8 In the 2011 survey, all three of these activities were included in one tick box whereas in the 2014 survey, two tick boxes were offered, one for breakfast and after school clubs, and one for holiday clubs. In amalgamating these two options, we took care not to double count.
- 9 This figure is higher than the 66% quoted in the section above because many churches that are supporting a food bank by donating food perhaps didn't feel they were doing enough to tick the box in the earlier question, which asked if they were 'involved in offering any of the following types of organised activity'.
- 10 *Feeding Britain: A strategy for zero hunger in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*, report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the United Kingdom, 2014
- 11 *Engagement with the Credit Union Sector*, Church Urban Fund, 2014
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 According to the Church of England website, churchgoers contribute 22.3 million volunteering hours each month to the local community.
- 14 *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011 – 2013*, Church of England, 2014