

FAITH IN ACTION:

A SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION AROUND MIDDLESBROUGH

At a time when many people are struggling to find work or to cope with the rising cost of living there is a growing concern about poverty in this country. Middlesbrough faces particular challenges; unemployment here is twice the national average and child poverty the third highest in the country. Poverty is more complex than the simple lack of material resources; its impact on human well-being affects family and community relationships as well as people's identity.¹ The Church, however, has a long tradition of supporting the most vulnerable in society, working in a grass-roots way alongside individuals, families and communities.

A survey conducted by Together Middlesbrough² sought to quantify the scale and range of social action undertaken by churches and Christian projects across Middlesbrough. This report summarises the findings of that survey, addressing a gap in knowledge of how churches are working in local communities and supporting people in need. It is offered as a resource to local churches, the voluntary and community sector, local authorities and statutory agencies.

KEY FINDINGS

Our survey found that:

- 98% of responding churches and Christian projects are engaged in at least one activity to address a social need.
- Together, these churches and projects are running a total of 276 activities amounting to approximately 800 hours of social action each week.
- An army of over 1,000 volunteers is involved in organised Christian social action, benefitting over 5,000 people in local communities every week.
- Churches and Christian projects offer a wide range of social action activities. They are more likely to be working with children and young people, women, the elderly and asylum seekers and least likely to be providing activities that tackle unemployment, homelessness, addictions or offer support to ex-offenders.
- Many churches are working jointly with other churches and community groups, but there are fewer partnerships with local authorities and other statutory agencies.
- Christian social action has grown in the past two years, and 74% of churches and projects have plans for further developments.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In May 2013, Together Middlesbrough sent an online survey³ to all known churches and Christian/church-based social action projects located or working within the boundaries of Middlesbrough Deanery, which includes South Bank, Eston and Normanby, Grangetown and Thornaby. These churches and projects were identified through a comprehensive search of church directories and websites and in total they numbered 60 churches and 21 projects (some small independent churches may have been missed). 57 of the 81 invited to take part responded, representing an overall response rate of 70% (62% for churches and 95% for projects). On assessing the representativeness of our response sample, we found that for churches there was a slight skew towards Anglican and Methodist churches and away from Roman Catholic and Salvation Army churches.

CHURCHES ARE ACTIVE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Our survey showed that 98% of responding churches and projects run at least one organised activity to address a social need in the area. We can conclude that at least 69% of known churches and projects in and around Middlesbrough are actively engaged in organised social action. The total figure is likely to be higher.⁴

Altogether, these churches and projects are running 276 activities. 245 of them take place regularly, usually weekly or monthly, and represent a total of approximately 800 hours of social action each week. There were also 31 occasional activities recorded, spread across 54% of the churches and projects. These include holiday clubs for children and seasonal activities to distribute resources, such as Christmas food hampers for families and individuals in need. Churches also run seasonal events including Christmas meals and summer community celebrations. In poorer areas where resources may be limited, these celebrations can be an important part of community life.



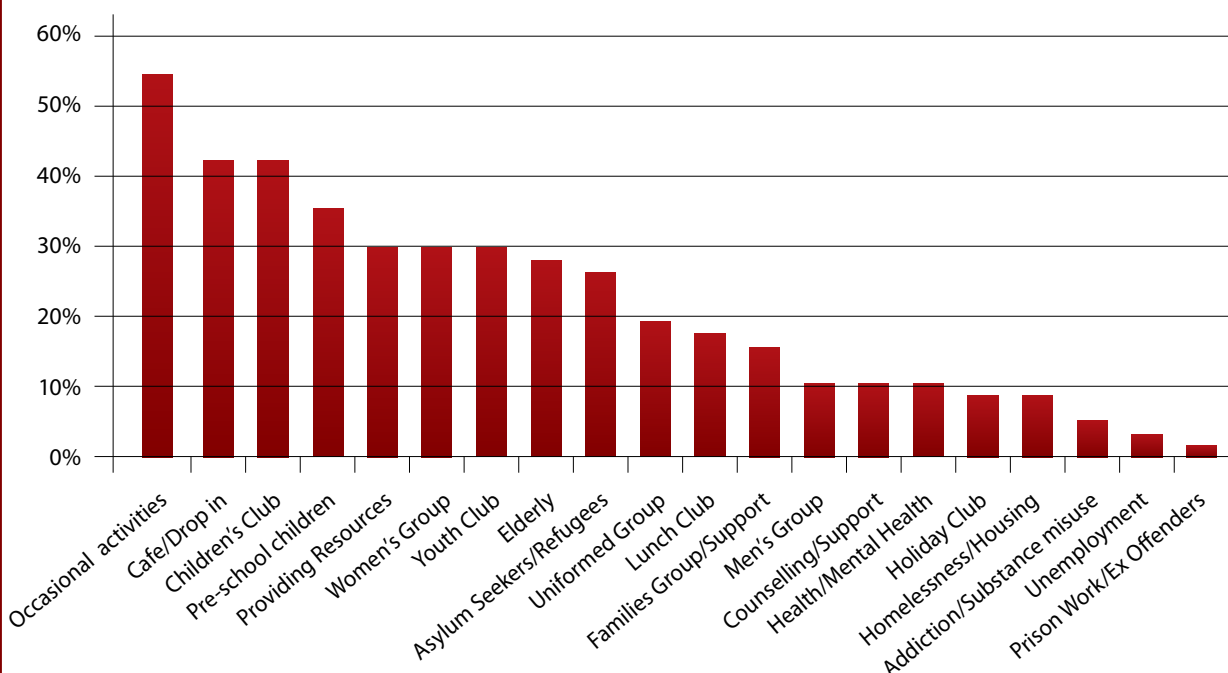
Many churches and projects are addressing more than one need, with 53% of respondents offering two to five activities and 36% between six and ten. Figure 1 below shows the range of activities provided. In total, 60% of churches and projects are providing a place of welcome and hospitality by running cafés and drop-ins (42%) and lunch clubs (18%). Apart from offering a friendly welcome and refreshments, these activities help to reduce isolation by creating a space for people to meet. Almost one third (30%) of churches and projects provide resources, such as food, clothing, household goods and furniture to people in need, and a number also link with Acts 435. ⁵

In terms of the people they support, it appears that churches and projects more frequently work with younger age groups including children (42%), pre-school children (35%), and young people (30%). Groups specifically for women are also common (30%), as well as support for older people (28%) and asylum seekers and refugees (26%). Only a small proportion of activities tackle homelessness, addiction, unemployment or provide support for prisoners and ex-offenders.

Respondents were asked to estimate the number of people taking part in each activity or being given regular support. This revealed that over 5,000 people a week benefit from social action activities run by churches and Christian projects.



Figure 1: Percentage of churches and projects running specific types of activities



Base 57

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MOTIVATED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

We wanted to use the survey to explore why churches and Christian projects are involved in social action. Respondents were asked to describe the aims and purpose of their project or activities and to include their statement of mission (if they have one). Most respondents (95%) had a written mission statement or were able to express a clear ethos for their activities. For many, social action is motivated primarily by their faith, the desire to reflect Gospel values and to demonstrate God's love and care for all. One church project commented, *"The bible teaches a lot about caring for the poor and practising hospitality to strangers"*.

The focus of this Christian social action, however, is clearly the wider community as the activities provided are open to all and not just church members. The mission statement of a local church expresses this clearly: *"In the community, for the community."*

Most activities and projects aim to meet identified needs, and there is a strong emphasis on service. However, in many cases the vision transcends the simple alleviation of specific needs and aspires to see people's lives transformed more holistically, challenging injustice, supporting people and communities to bring about change. This is often done in a relational way, providing support that goes beyond statutory provision, and working with people who may feel alienated by formal service provision. One respondent emphasised *"We celebrate the potential of people."*



AN ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS

It is difficult to put an accurate figure on the number of volunteers involved in Christian social action across Middlesbrough. Respondents were asked to estimate how many people are volunteering within their social action activities and projects. In total, these estimates indicate an army of at least 1,000 volunteers, with many people giving their time, energy and skills to support people in need and their local communities.⁶ Furthermore, this activity is in addition to the voluntary visiting and support work carried out on an informal basis by local churches. Most of these volunteers come from church congregations. 57% of projects and activities draw volunteers from more than one church, showing a willingness for Christians to work together across congregations. Over half (55%) of churches and projects are also supported by volunteers from the local community and a quarter (25%) from other local groups. This suggests that the work of churches is valued and supported by members of the wider community and other community groups who are not part of their worshipping congregations.

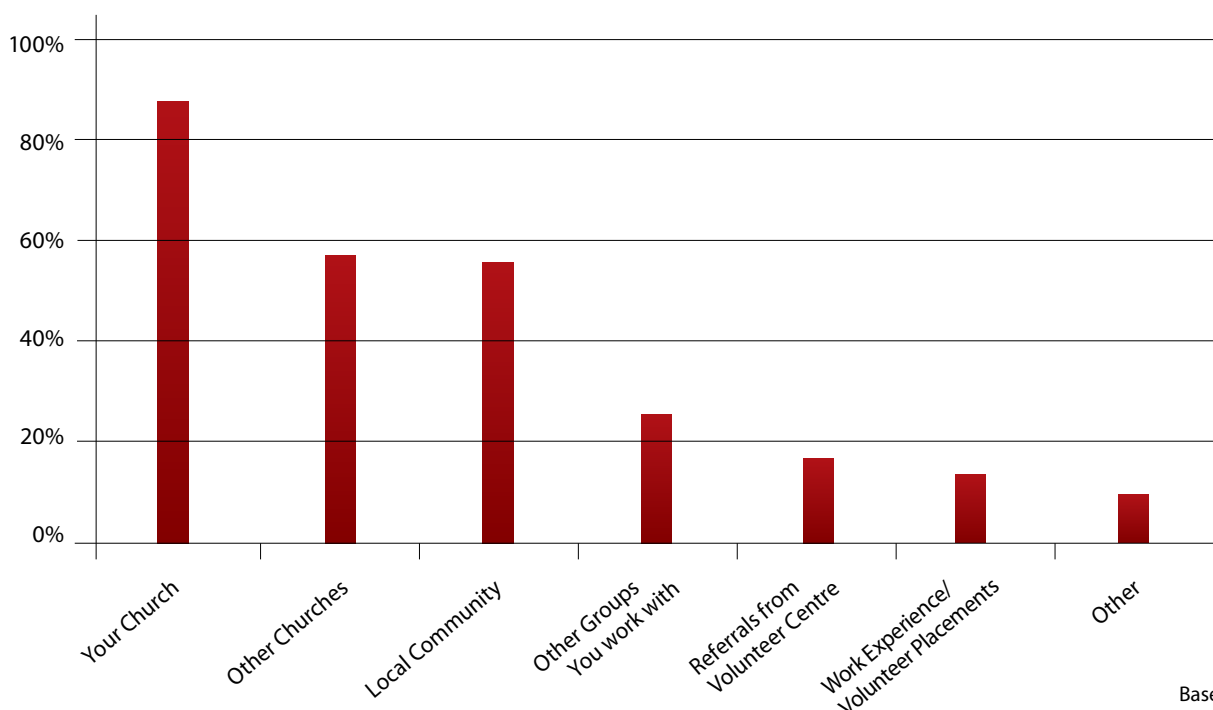
With only 16% of projects and activities relying on volunteers referred by local volunteer centres, churches and Christian projects clearly depend on recruiting within their own networks. A small number of activities are supported by volunteers from other groups that provide work experience and volunteer placements, including Teesside University and HMP Kirkclevington.

We found that 68% of churches and projects would like support in promoting their volunteering opportunities. In response, a new virtual volunteering noticeboard has been developed on the Together Middlesbrough website.⁷

Volunteering is obviously vital to Christian social action. However, our research showed that 53% of churches and projects employ staff, other than priests and ministers, to help run activities. Almost two-thirds of these paid staff work in larger projects, managing activities and supervising volunteers.



Figure 2: Volunteers working in Christian Social Action

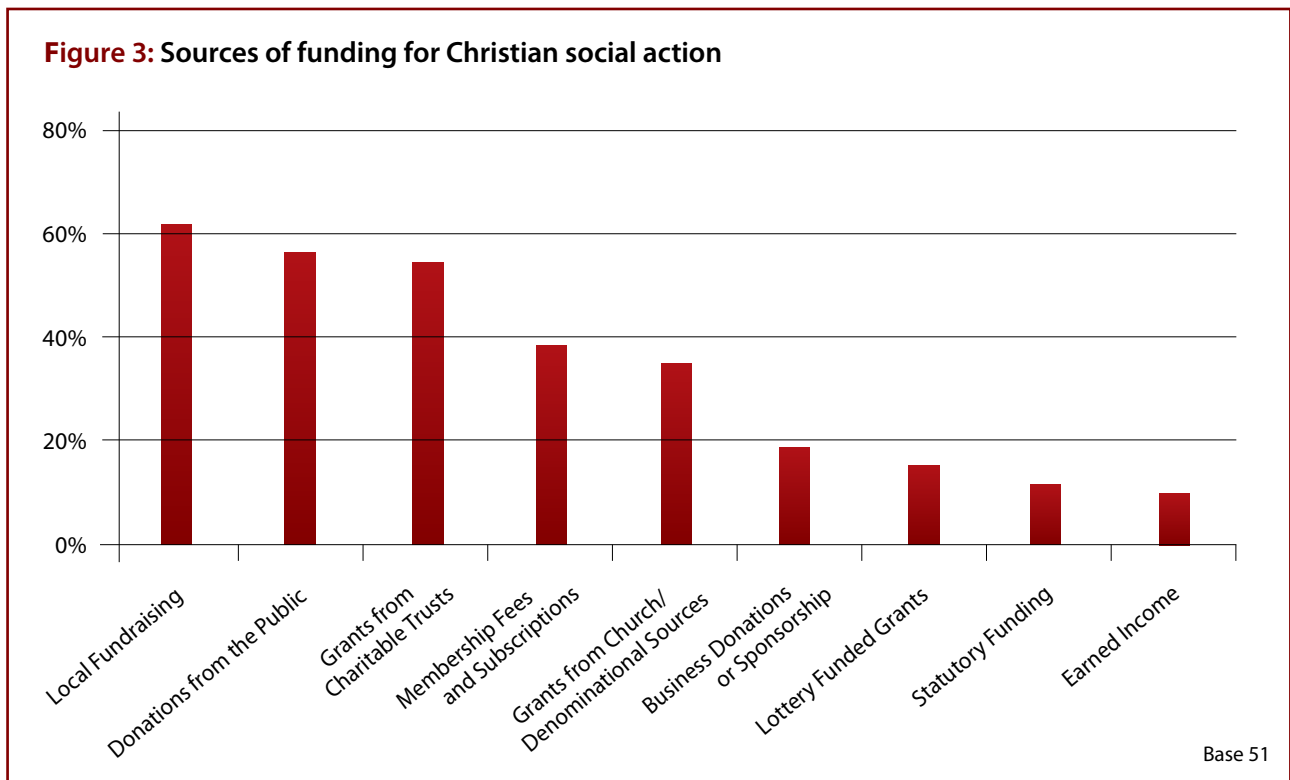


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FUNDING THE WORK

In conducting this survey we sought to discover how local Christian social action is funded. Respondents were asked to identify the main sources of finance for the projects and activities they currently undertake. Figure 4 shows that churches rely heavily on raising their own funds through sponsored events, sales, donations from the public and small charges for some of the activities they provide. In addition, over 61% have accessed grants from church or denominational sources and/or other charitable trusts. In contrast, grants from the national lottery had been received by only 16% of respondents. Local businesses offer financial or in-kind support to 20% of churches and projects and the lowest level of support comes from statutory sources, typically from community councils or other small grants programmes.

Over three quarters of churches and projects said that they needed assistance with fundraising and Together Middlesbrough is currently developing a programme to provide this.⁸

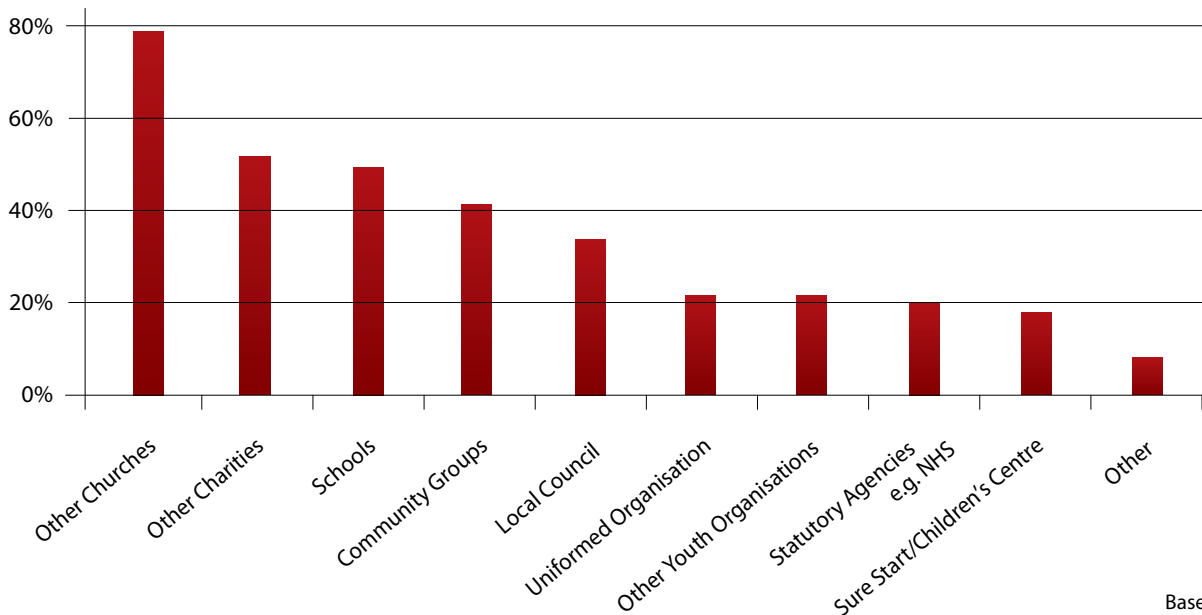


WORKING TOGETHER

One of the key aims of Together Middlesbrough is to encourage churches and projects to work more closely together in tackling poverty. We therefore wanted to establish the extent to which this is already happening. Although Middlesbrough does not have a strong history of churches working together, it appears that there is already a considerable degree of collaboration between churches and projects on social action activities. In fact, 80% of respondents reported that they were working together with other churches. This may reflect the large number of churches supporting Middlesbrough Food bank, which started in September 2012.

There are also strong links at a community level, with 52% of churches and projects working in partnership with other local charities, 50% working with local schools and 42% with local community groups.

Figure 4: Percentage of churches and projects working with other groups



Churches and projects are less likely to be working with the local council or other statutory agencies, although there are examples of joint working with the probation service, children's services and housing. In a climate where the landscape of local services is changing, there may be further opportunities to strengthen and develop these partnerships.

PLANNING FOR GROWTH

The current economic climate has posed real challenges for many charities, with increased demand often coinciding with cuts in funding. We wanted to discover how Christian social action in Middlesbrough may have been affected and asked respondents if they had seen significant changes in their projects and activities over the past two years, such as growth/decline, new activities or new partnerships. 83% of respondents reported a significant change, and this was predominantly growth. A number reported an increase in demand, often due to a decline in other local services. In one example, the increased demand for parent and toddler groups was related to reduced services from a local Sure Start. Others described growing demand as a result of an increase in the numbers of people struggling and needing support. One third reported that they had started new activities or formed new partnerships in the last two years in order to strengthen the services they could provide. Others had seen an encouraging growth in the number of volunteers offering their support. Only 14% reported a decline and, in some cases, this was balanced by growth in other areas of activity. The overwhelming picture appears to be one of increasing Christian social action across the Middlesbrough area.

We also asked whether churches and projects had plans for developing new or existing activities over the next one to two years. Again the response was very positive, with 74% of respondents reporting such plans. Many were focused on growing existing activities or offering additional but related support e.g. they may start to provide help to families and parents as a natural extension to their existing work with children. Several churches said they were planning to develop their buildings for increased community use. Almost six in ten (57%) said they would like support for these development plans from Together Middlesbrough and this will be an important factor in shaping the work of the project over the next 12 to 24 months.

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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings show that local churches and Christian projects are very actively engaged in meeting social needs in the communities they serve. Over 1,000 volunteers are motivated to give their time, energy and skills and there has been widespread growth in Christian social action over the past two years, with many churches and projects planning further developments. Christian social action already makes a significant contribution to local communities and should be valued and celebrated both by local churches, and other organisations and agencies. Together Middlesbrough will help to share success stories and good practice through the Bridges of Hope conference, regular newsletters and events.

Together Middlesbrough is allocating resources and support in response to requests for help with volunteering and funding. The project will also aim to support churches and projects with their future development plans, ensuring that new developments form a close fit with other churches and projects, and with other agencies wherever possible. The changing landscape of local services provides opportunities for closer working relationships with local authorities and other services. Together Middlesbrough aims to support the development of any future joint-working initiatives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Endnotes

- 1 The Web of Poverty: Area-based poverty and exclusion in England www.cuf.org.uk/web-of-poverty
- 2 Together Middlesbrough is a joint venture between Church Urban Fund and the Diocese of York. It brings together churches and Christian projects to tackle issues of poverty in and around Middlesbrough. Together Middlesbrough is part of a national network of Joint Ventures developed by Church Urban Fund to help create sustainable and more effective solutions to tackling poverty in England.
- 3 Paper copies of the survey were sent to 12 churches that did not have easy access to the internet.
- 4 A search on the internet shows that, according to their websites, at least some of those churches and projects that did not respond are engaged in organised social action.
- 5 Acts 435 is an online resource linking people in need with those who can help acts435.org.uk
- 6 The actual figure of 1,139 is based on the middle value of the ranges used by respondents e.g. 1-5, 6-10, 11-15
- 7 To find out more, visit www.cuf.org.uk/together-middlesbrough/how-to-get-involved
- 8 To find out more, visit www.cuf.org.uk/together-middlesbrough/funding

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