



LISTEN UP!

CONNECTING CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH LISTENING



AUGUST 2014

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INTRODUCTION

Thousands of churches around the country run activities and projects that provide valuable support to people in their communities. Indeed, recent research shows that, every year, 10 million adults in England use community services provided by churches.¹ In planning and delivering such services, and in understanding their communities more broadly, it is essential that churches listen to the people they seek to support.

Listening is a crucial first step for any activity that seeks to tackle poverty. It is important for challenging preconceptions - helping us to see people's strengths, as well as their needs, and to recognise the ingenuity and resourcefulness they have to employ to manage on very low incomes. It is also important for breaking down power dynamics between 'helper' and 'helped', creating spaces in which friendship and honesty can grow. In doing this, listening has the power to change everyone involved, building mutual understanding and relationships of care and support.

This report tells the story of one church that undertook a listening exercise. Based on an estate in Birmingham, it wanted to support people who were being affected by, among other things, issues of low pay, unemployment and welfare reform. Instead of moving forward with an action plan, the church wanted first to listen to local people - to hear their stories, learn about the challenges they face and understand more about how they cope with those challenges. The learning gained from these conversations would then help guide the church as it planned its work with and in the community.

In their listening, the group used a process called *Listen Up!* This process was developed to help churches listen to their communities by conducting in-depth interviews with individuals or households, using participative tools to stimulate conversation and gather information. *Listen Up!* focuses on learning about people's livelihoods (the ways in which they sustain a living), and uses their everyday experiences to build up a picture of the assets and resources they draw on to get by, as well as the challenges they face. Gathering this information helps to identify what needs to change for people's livelihoods to become more sustainable and secure.

The story of this listening exercise is told by the group who undertook it. They explain how the listening was done, what was heard and, finally, what the group will do as a result. We hope that this report will be a useful resource for other churches seeking to listen to, connect with and support people in their communities.

Bethany Eckley

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¹ 'Good Neighbours: how churches help communities flourish', Theos and Church Urban Fund, 2014

1. HOW WE LISTENED

As a church, we knew we wanted to listen to people in our community. Based in Hodge Hill, an estate on the edge of Birmingham, we have been intentionally pursuing an asset-based approach² to our work in the neighbourhood for several years. At the heart of this type of approach is the act of listening – inviting often unheard voices to be heard and those who may be more used to talking, to listen.

We first started to use this approach when we undertook Birmingham Diocese's 'Know Your Church – Know Your Neighbourhood' programme. As part of that programme, we gathered statistics about our neighbourhood and visited key people in local 'centres of community', including schools, shops and youth centres, to listen to them talk about the area. We have since developed this work through 'Open Door'. This community drop-in not only offers support for job and money issues, but also seeks to help people identify their own passions, knowledge and skills, and to connect them with their neighbours.

Three years on, we felt that *Listen Up!* would allow us to build on this work. By shifting from listening to practitioners in local institutions to listening to local people, we hoped that we would gain a deeper insight into the lives of our neighbours, enabling us to work alongside them and support them to a greater extent.

THE LISTEN UP! PROCESS

The process was designed by the Diocese of Sheffield to help church groups conduct in-depth and participative interviews with people in their community.³ These interviews focus on understanding people's livelihoods – the way in which they use the assets and resources at their disposal to sustain a living. The objective is to identify the things that need to change in order for people's livelihoods to become more sustainable, secure and less vulnerable to the unexpected events that can destabilise and undermine their attempts to improve their situation.

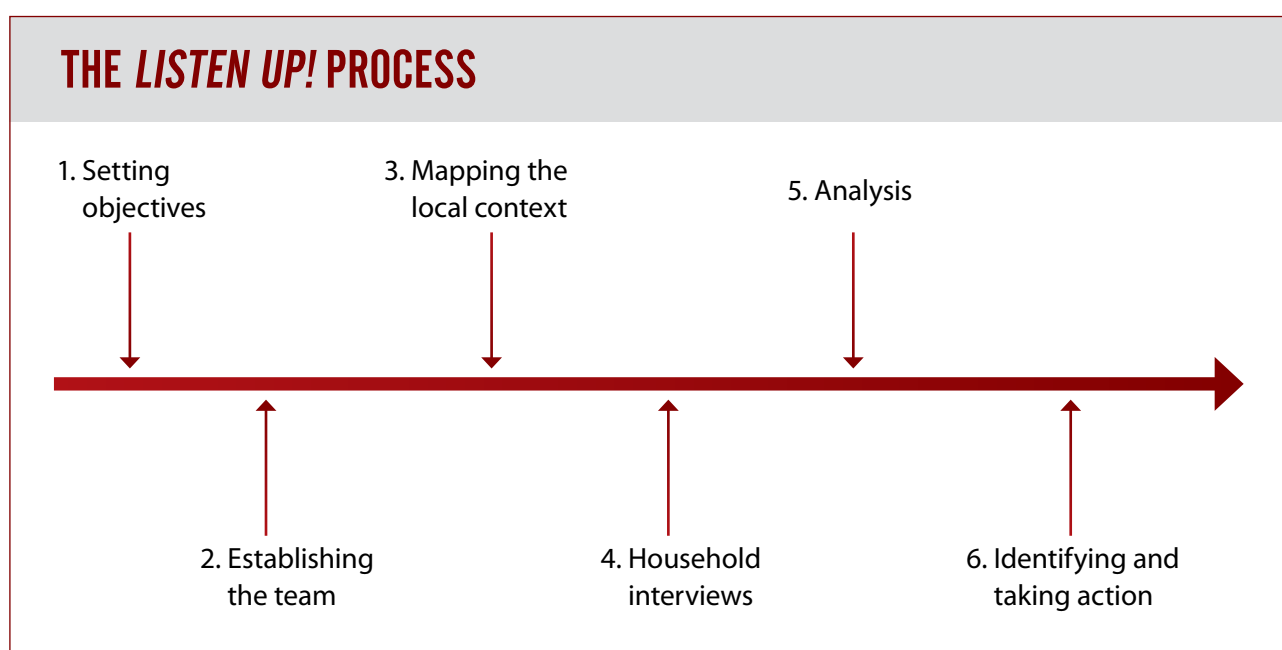
The process is based on the values, principles and concepts of the 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach'. An approach to international development, this was introduced to the UK by Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty (see Appendix A for more information).

The process is made up of six stages, as set out in the diagram below. For us, the first three stages had already largely been completed as a result of our previous work in the neighbourhood. We did, however, need to establish the team. This was drawn from our church congregation and included four people in full-time or part-time jobs, and two retired people, alongside the local vicar and the church's full-time community worker.

2 Asset-based approaches to community development focus on uncovering and identifying the assets and capacities already present within a community and then mobilising those assets to build stronger communities (see www.cuf.org.uk/ABCD for more information).

3 *Listen Up!* was developed by independent social researcher Jane Perry, working with the Diocese of Sheffield as part of the Church Action on Poverty's Partner Church programme. It was piloted and developed in partnership with five church communities in Sheffield and Rotherham during 2013-14. More information can be found at www.church-poverty.org.uk/listenup

Before we started interviewing local residents, we spent a number of hours exploring *Listen Up!* together. We spent time learning more about the process itself, and thinking about how we could best put it into practice. We reflected on what it was that we wanted to gain from this exercise and what we would do with the information gathered. We also discussed the best and most appropriate ways of approaching potential interviewees. As we were going to be asking for fairly personal information, we wanted to make sure we were prepared to handle any possible questions or situations that might arise in an appropriate and respectful way. Once we had discussed this, we went on to explore how we would conduct the interviews.



THE INTERVIEW TOOLS

During the interviews, tools are used to help stimulate conversation and record household information. As a team, we looked at the 14 tools in the Sustainable Livelihoods Handbook and selected – and, in some cases, developed – four. We felt that these four would help us to get the information we were particularly interested in, and that any more might be unmanageable within a single conversation. We share a short summary of each tool below and a copy of each is included in the Appendices.

Tool A: Your Household

The first tool was an A3 piece of paper with a picture of a house in the middle. We would invite people to write or draw information about their household - who they lived with, who might visit week-to-week, as well as places they might go daily/weekly. We felt this was a good way of breaking the ice, and would give us a helpful insight into people's situations - whether they worked or not, who they lived with and who they saw frequently. Alongside this tool we planned to ask the following questions: Where does each person regularly go to and how often? How close or far are the places you travel to, and how do you get there? Who regularly visits the household and how often? Who does what to help the household run?

Tool B: Timeline

The next tool was a timeline. Interviewees would be asked to mark significant life events, placing them chronologically and above or below the line depending on how positive or negative they had been. We all felt the timeline tool would help us understand more about the interviewee's life history, building a fuller picture of their significant life events, as well as enabling us to assess the impact of those events on the household and begin to understand how they coped with them.

Tool C: Money Pots

We wanted to find out more about people's finances but in an unobtrusive way that would not make them feel uncomfortable. As a team, we decided to develop a tool of our own. We created a sheet with two Money Pots on it, labelled 'incoming' and 'outgoing'. We would then invite people to write their incoming and outgoing finances in the different pots, either as definite amounts or rough percentages. We felt this tool would be useful to see if their incomings and outgoings were relatively equal, or if one outweighed the other.

Alongside this tool, we planned to ask questions such as: Do things ever get difficult financially? When does this occur and how do you manage? How is money managed to avoid difficulties? Do you have anywhere you're able to turn in a crisis?

Tool D: Livelihood Ladders

The final tool we developed focused on people's assets - their natural strengths, their capabilities and their resources. We had a sheet with five ladders on it, each one signifying a different type of asset: social, physical, financial, human and public. Each ladder had four rungs on it, and each rung had a statement next to it, which, from bottom to top, said:

- Everything is a struggle
- Things are ok, but unlikely to get much better in the future
- Things are beginning to gradually improve
- Doing fine: the household is strong and can recover from shocks

We invited people (either individually, or as a household depending on what felt appropriate) to place a mark at a specific rung on each ladder, signifying how they felt about a particular type of asset. This activity would help us to recognise how, given the complexity of life, someone could feel that they have a lot of one type of asset, but none of another.

Alongside this tool, we planned to explore the following questions: What are the barriers, the things that stand in the way of life getting better? What are your strengths, the things that help you to get by? How do your strengths help you to overcome the barriers? What else might be needed to help you overcome them?

THE INTERVIEWS

Once we felt confident about the process and the interviews, we reflected on who we should interview. We firstly decided to limit ourselves to working-age adults (not pensioners or children) on a low income because we wanted to focus on issues around employment and benefits. We then decided to approach people we had been getting to know through Open Door, as we hoped that the interviews would allow us to develop these relationships.

We felt it was important to explain to the interviewees why we were carrying out the *Listen Up!* process and what we were going to do with the information. We, therefore, created a flyer with basic information and a list of potential FAQ's which we could go through with them (see Appendix B).

In total, we were able to conduct five interviews with local residents, spending an hour to an hour and a half with each individual/household. Working within our team's time constraints, we felt that this number of interviews was realistic, particularly given the emphasis on really listening to and doing justice to the complexity of people's lives. We also felt that our existing knowledge of the area would enable us to extrapolate some common themes from five interviews.

Whilst we are not able to say for certain how many people experience a particular issue, this exercise allows us to tell the stories we heard, we hope, with value and integrity. We also hope it will allow us to continue working with participants and the wider community to further explore the issues raised and begin to suggest potential actions which may help to address them.

Each interview was conducted by two members of our team and took place, depending on which the interviewee preferred, either in their own home or a quiet corner of a public space.=-

ANALYSIS

When all the interviews had been completed, the group met and spent time reflecting on each one. A general discussion then focused on four questions: What assets do people have? What shocks (unexpected life events) do they experience and how do they cope with them? What role does the wider context play in shaping livelihoods? What are we going to do next? Our responses to these questions are set out in the following chapters.

2. WHAT WE HEARD

In this chapter, we briefly explore the information gathered from the interviews, drawing out some of the recurring themes and issues that will shape our ongoing work.

WHAT ASSETS DO PEOPLE HAVE?

Assets include people's natural strengths, their capabilities and their resources. Crucially these assets are not just financial, but considered across five areas – social, physical, financial, human and public.

Social assets, networks of relationships with family, friends and others in the community, were seen as very important by all our interviewees. The tools we used showed that there was a clear correlation between the amount of weekly activity going on in a household and the way people felt about their social assets: those who had more weekly activity in their household – who left the house more or had more visitors, as shown in Tool A – placed themselves much higher on the social assets ladder in Tool D.

While this is perhaps unsurprising, it shows that people really valued those relationships and viewed them as an asset that made life easier, providing support when shocks came along. For example, one interviewee called the people at his church his 'spiritual family' and explained that this network was a huge part of his social life and support structure. This had made it easier to deal with the consequences of a redundancy. Others were very reliant on friends or family for their accommodation or financial support – life would have been much harder without these networks.

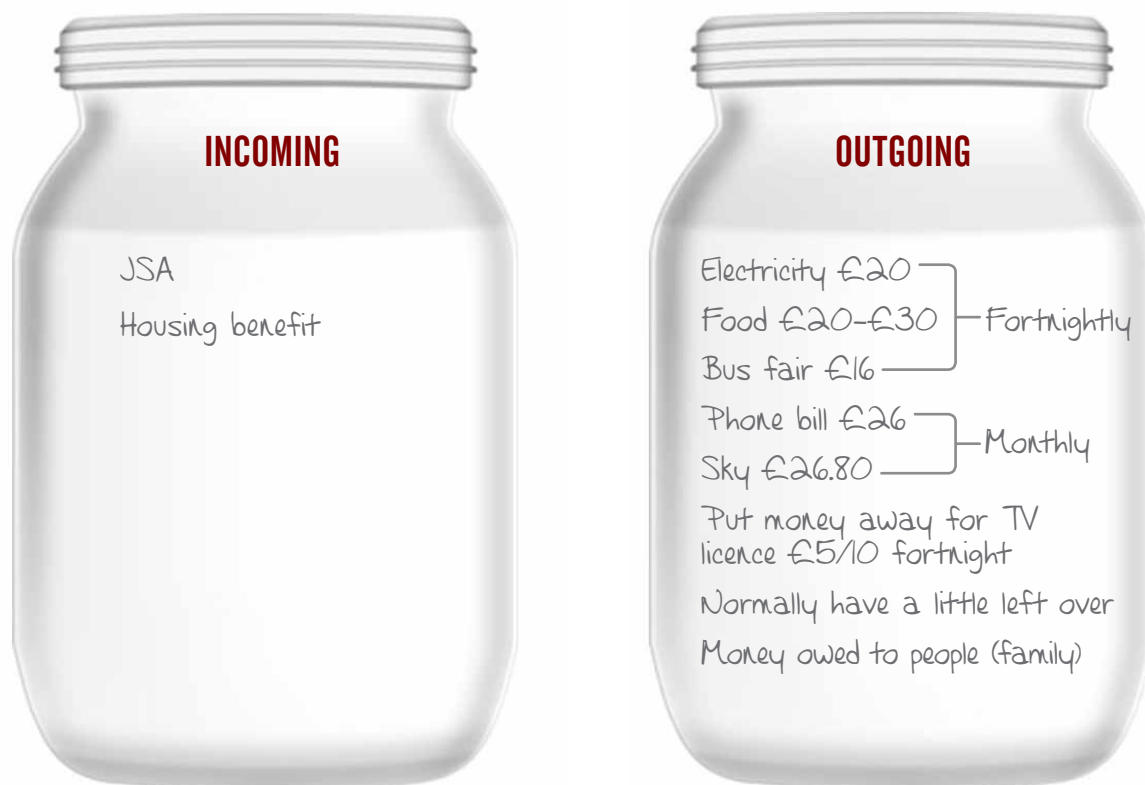
The physical assets mentioned by our interviewees included housing, basic furniture, some kind of cooker, a TV, a mobile phone and (for them, ideally,) internet access. Only one household had a car. Interestingly, several interviewees talked about their mobile phone and access to the internet as among their most important physical assets. Apparently this was because they allowed people to keep in contact with friends and family that they didn't often get to see. People also talked about their struggles to keep their mobile phone topped up with credit, or to maintain some kind of internet access at home. It became clear that one of the benefits of coming to the church drop-in was to use the free wifi connection.

Overall, our sense was that most people felt they had 'just enough' physical assets to get by, but were quite vulnerable to a vital asset breaking down (two interviewees had cookers which had recently packed up), or being unable to pay ongoing maintenance costs such as phone credit or monthly internet charges.

The Money Pots tool highlighted the very tight margins that most interviewees lived with from week to week. This showed their relatively low financial assets but also revealed their budgeting skills – their human assets. Interviewees talked at length about their budgeting and saving habits, which included putting money aside each week to pay for the TV licence, starting to pay for home insurance after experiencing a flood at home, deciding not to turn the heating on over winter, or saving to buy food and presents at Christmas.

Most interviewees paid their regular bills first, before spending whatever was left on other essentials including food, phone and nappies etc. Luxuries would only be bought afterwards. Several knew their incomings and outgoings down to the pound, as can be seen in the copy of one person's Money Pots tool below.

TOOL C INCOMING AND OUTGOING MONEY



CASE STUDY – BUDGETING ON A LOW INCOME

Emily has two young children and recently moved to a two-bedroom apartment on the fifth floor of a tower block. At the moment she isn't working, but stays at home to look after her children.

Emily budgets very carefully and knows her incomings and outgoings to the nearest pound. She is strongly resistant to taking out loans, but had to take out a social loan to pay for a new carpet after her flat was badly flooded last year.

Following this experience, Emily joined her local credit union and started paying for home insurance, so that she won't have to take out a social loan if another unexpected household bill arises. She is also able to save money by sharing wifi with someone who lives downstairs.

With the help of her uncle, Emily has just started her own small business – buying stocks of women's clothing from her uncle and selling them cheaply online. She hopes that this business will bring her some cash and also allow her to stay at home with her children.

As a result of this careful budgeting, Emily's budget tends to balance out at zero.

When we asked our interviewees to place themselves on the financial ladder of Tool D, it became obvious that none of them felt they were well off. While people showed great resourcefulness in making ends meet, they also talked about how they would struggle if faced with any unexpected outgoings - showing their lack of long-term financial resilience.

Yet each of the people interviewed scored themselves highest on the human assets ladder, showing that they had quite a high degree of confidence in their own ability to cope with and respond to challenges.

The term 'public assets' was perhaps the least accessible to our interviewees. When, however, interviewers explained that this included locally available resources and the accessibility of things like jobs, support and transport, most talked at length. Of all the five asset ladders, people gave themselves the lowest score on this ladder. The issues that were mentioned most frequently were lack of access to public transport, childcare, and access to benefits and other sources of advice and support. We look at these issues in more depth below.

WHAT SHOCKS DO PEOPLE EXPERIENCE AND HOW DO THEY COPE WITH THEM?

Life shocks are the unexpected events that change or destabilise previous livelihood strategies, whilst not always negative the disruption caused by shocks can undermine people's attempts to improve their situation.

The stories we heard illustrated the kinds of shocks that people experience – being made redundant, experiencing poor health, a sudden change in benefits and moving house. They also showed just how important it is to have assets to draw upon when life throws up unexpected events. When financial, social or physical assets are limited, people struggle to adapt to their changed circumstances.

One couple were able to deal with the shock of a redundancy because they had a redundancy package and an inheritance to draw upon. These enabled them to continue living in the same house without needing to look for other work. The couple were deeply embedded in their church community and, as they didn't have to work, were now volunteering a lot of their time to support community activities. Not only were they supported by their own assets but, because of that, were able to build up the assets of the wider community.

However, in another interview (set out in the box below) we saw how shocks can pile one on top of another, creating a snowball effect. If poor health is followed by an unexpected change to benefits, efforts to budget properly are thrown off balance and this can cause people to fall into debt and experience a great deal of stress and anxiety.

Yet, in this particular situation, our church had been able to begin the process of rebuilding this person's assets. By offering support with his CV writing, we managed to get his benefit sanction lifted, so that he had some money to live on. By offering advocacy support, we were able to sort out the debt issues with the bank. And by offering relational support, we were able to reduce his stress and anxiety and begin to build his social networks. Without this intervention, his situation would probably have further deteriorated.

CASE STUDY – DEALING WITH LIFE SHOCKS

Rob had worked as a security guard in a factory for many years, until he had his first stroke in 2002. His health gradually deteriorated, to the point where he needed a quadruple heart bypass. Although Rob was assessed as fit for work, he didn't feel well enough to look for jobs (particularly due to shortness of breath, high stress levels and an inability to walk far), so he was sanctioned and left completely without benefits for six weeks.

During that time, things were pretty desperate – in four days, he ate just one tin of tomatoes. He was given a food voucher by the job centre when they sanctioned him but, unfortunately, he couldn't afford to travel to the food bank.

During this time, Rob received a text from a payday lending company and started the process of applying for a loan online. Without realising it, he had registered himself (including his bank details) with a payday lending broker, who not only took an initial membership fee from his account and an ongoing monthly fee, but also passed his details on to other companies who also charged him membership fees. When the JSA finally came into his account, £170 was taken straight away by these companies, leaving him even worse off.

Rob reflected: *'I applied for a loan, not knowing it was a broker. Those brokers then shared my information on with other loan companies and, as a result, brokers were taking money out of my account, without me knowing about it.'*

Rob discovered Open Door (our church community drop-in) at this time, having hardly eaten for a week. With help from the team at Open Door, he was able to eat and, some weeks later, managed to get most of his money back. Since then, he has succeeded in stabilising himself financially.

Up until this point in his life, Rob had been able to budget well and hadn't got into debt. A succession of shocks, however, caused him to struggle, particularly because there was a lack of structures in place to help him through a particularly difficult time.

Rob said: *'Generally my benefits are enough to cover my outgoings, but if something happens, I can struggle to budget for it, as I don't have enough money to save.'*

WHAT ROLE DOES THE WIDER CONTEXT PLAY IN SHAPING LIVELIHOODS?

Placing household information in the context of wider factors that shape community life enables an analysis of the extent to which institutional structures and programmes shape household livelihoods.

While reflecting on where they would place themselves on the public assets ladder of Tool D, people raised several issues for discussion including public transport, the cost of childcare and the difficulty of accessing available services.

All interviewees acknowledged the high cost of transport (both bus fares and petrol), and most talked about the difficulties of travelling further afield. These costs make it much harder to access services, amenities and social networks outside the immediate area – reducing people’s assets significantly.

One woman who has two small children talked about the difficulties of finding adequate local childcare. We know that this is a problem faced by many others within the neighbourhood. After a negative experience with one local provider, she now feels that there isn’t anywhere to leave her children. In recent months, two new commercial childcare providers have been established on the estate, but these may well be unaffordable for people on low incomes. This lack of trusted or affordable childcare limits people’s ability to work, and therefore build up financial, human and social assets.

One of the most significant issues we discovered in our interviews was how little support is available for people who are struggling to make ends meet. This is primarily because of the difficulty of physically accessing services that are located outside the immediate area. It is also a result of the lack of services, many of which have been affected by recent funding cuts.

Three of the people interviewed talked about their housing situation and their difficulties in finding alternative accommodation and/or decorating and furnishing the accommodation they did have. One interviewee expressed his frustration at not being able to access the Neighbourhood Housing Office and the fact that he could only book an appointment weeks in advance.

In all of the interviews, we felt that people highlighted, in one form or another, the lack of local, accessible support, particularly when it came to advice about housing, debt and benefits. We believe that it is crucial to explore this issue further with residents beyond *Listen Up!*

3. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The *Listen Up!* process has given us an important insight into the lives and livelihoods of people in our community. We recognise that the small number of interviews limits our ability to draw definite conclusions or generalise, yet we have some tentative key findings that will help to shape our future work.

Firstly, we have seen the value of social assets and the way in which strong relationships and support networks can prevent one shock from spiralling into many more. We have seen examples of what happens when these networks are present and understood, to a greater degree, the stress, fragility and lack of resilience that can result when they are absent or fractured. We have also seen tangible examples of how churches can help to build social assets by welcoming people into relationships and support networks.

Secondly, we have learned more about, and been very struck by, people's capacity to cope with and manage on very low incomes. This has been a very valuable lesson. We have seen the importance of assets in building people's resilience to unexpected life events, and understood more about the contribution of the church drop-in to building these assets.

Thirdly, we have understood more about the lack of local support services (such as childcare or benefits/debt advice), the inaccessibility of services that exist elsewhere in the city (due to the cost and lack of public transport) and the difficulties this can cause people trying to build a secure and sustainable livelihood.

Fourthly, we have experienced for ourselves the importance of listening. Although this has been a fairly small-scale exercise, it has been a valuable one. Taking the time to sit and listen to people's stories is a powerful statement for a church to make, one that says people are important and that every single person has strengths, resources and assets they can share with others. This is a message that we want to continue to share and live by as a church.

This process has been a significant exercise for us; one that has developed our way of thinking about and understanding our work in the area. For example, while we had previously expressed the work of our community drop-in in terms of 'assets', we had not been aware of how the drop-in could help build such a wide variety of assets – physical and financial, as well as human and social. Understanding this is a real encouragement and will also help to shape the work we do there in the future.

NEXT STEPS

For us, this report is one step in a much longer process. Next, we will bring interviewees together, to share our reflections and discuss follow-up questions such as: How can we work together to help build social networks? How can we increase people's access to important physical assets, including the internet? How can we help people access public services?

We will also explore the possibility of involving interviewees in acting and advocating for change on some of the issues which have emerged. Our existing links with wider movements in the city – Citizens UK and Birmingham’s Social Inclusion process - might enable us to get involved in wider processes of change, such as the issue of benefits sanctions. The relationships we have developed locally through *Listen Up!* may prove a good foundation to build on in the wider city.

The insights gained have persuaded us that it would be valuable to offer the structured ‘listening conversation’ to those who come to our community drop-in, as part of our journey together. There is an issue of capacity here, but the benefits, both relationally and in terms of learning for both participants and listeners, could be significant. We may develop a ‘light’ version of the interview, using fewer tools or focusing less on finances, that would make it easier to continue. We are also committed to a second round of interviews which the team are particularly keen to focus on people of retirement age and older.

Finally, there is clearly work to be done to increase the support available locally, making it easier and cheaper for people to access the services and advice they need. In doing this, we need to think carefully about sustainability and accessibility. How can we work with others to develop something that will last and how can we make sure it is done by and for the people that really need it? In this and all our work in the neighbourhood, we recognise the importance of finding creative ways to build and develop relationships, welcoming people into the kinds of supportive social networks that can build resilience and transform lives.

APPENDIX A: THE SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS APPROACH

The *Listen Up!* process is based on a particular approach to community development called the ‘Sustainable Livelihoods Approach’ (SLA). This approach was developed in the global south by international development experts and has been brought into the UK context by Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty (see their ‘Sustainable Livelihoods Handbook’, 2009).

This approach adopts a distinctive perspective on the understanding of poverty. It takes as its starting point not deprivation, but assets: the strengths and capabilities of people living in poverty and the strategies they use to get by. Connections are made between detailed household-level information and the wider context and this information is then used to plan and prioritise possible actions to bring about positive change in people’s lives.

As an approach, SLA is based on four key concepts.

Livelihoods: These are the ways in which people sustain a living. They are a combination of assets (the resources people have) and strategies (the decisions people make to exploit their assets). SLA seeks to understand people’s livelihoods and identify what needs to change in order for their livelihoods to become more secure and sustainable.

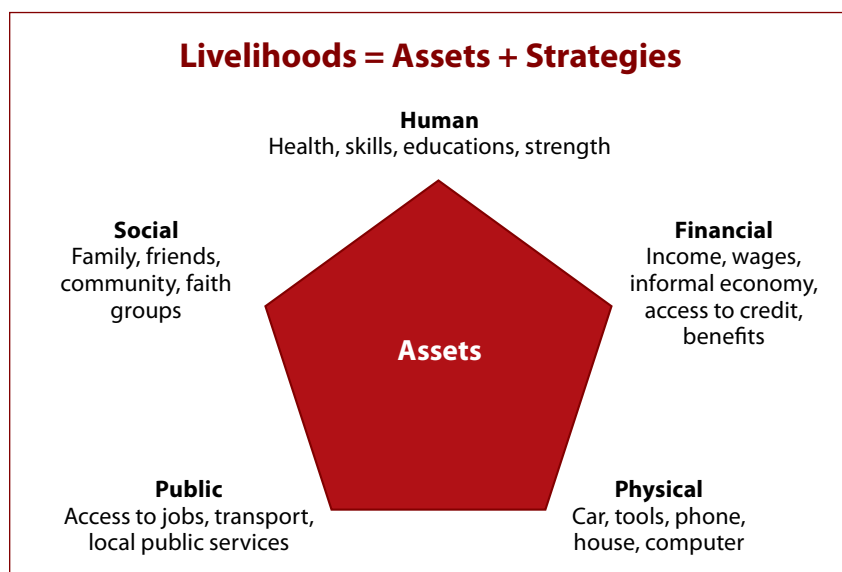
Assets: These include people’s natural strengths, their capabilities and their resources. Crucially these assets are not just financial but considered across five areas – social, physical, financial, human and public.

Context: SLA places information gathered about households in the context of wider factors that shape life in the local community. This enables an analysis of the extent to which institutional structures and programmes (such as the benefits system, local regeneration policies etc.) shape the way in which households construct their livelihood.

Life-shocks and decisions: Life shocks are the unexpected events that can destabilise and undermine people’s attempts to improve their situation, for example, deterioration in health, redundancy or a car accident. Decisions are the choices people make in order to manage their situations and pre-empt or respond to life shocks.

Further information on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach can be found at www.ifad.org/sla.

For its recent application in the UK context, see www.church-poverty.org.uk/livelihoods.



APPENDIX B: FLYER AND TOOLS

Listen Up!

Are you interested in:

- *Sharing your experiences of making ends meet?*
- *Exploring practical ways of making things better in your neighbourhood?*
- *Joining a group of local people, to listen to other local people?*

Hodge Hill Listen Up! aims to:

- listen to the experiences of local people (particularly those who are on low or unstable incomes, or who have had to overcome particular challenges in life)
- identify opportunities to develop and strengthen local sources of community and support
- build up a local evidence base to help us engage politically on issues of common concern
- empower and equip local people to be able to listen more attentively to their neighbours



Open Door

together turning 'I need...' into 'I can...'

Email: *For more information contact Sarah Maxfield*
Tel:

TOOL A – YOUR HOUSEHOLD



TOOL B -- OK/NOT OK TIMELINE

START



TOOL C -- INCOMING AND OUTGOING MONEY



TOOL D – LIVELIHOODS LADDER

