

KEY FINDINGS

TACKLING HOMELESSNESS TOGETHER: A STUDY OF NINE FAITH-BASED HOUSING PROJECTS

This report summarises the results of a study carried out for Church Urban Fund and Housing Justice to understand how churches are responding to housing-related issues in their local communities and how more might be done to make a bigger impact. The key findings are:

- Church-based voluntary projects are reaching out effectively to many thousands of people suffering homelessness and other related problems up and down the country.
- The Church has provided support to start and maintain projects, and its continued support is vital. It should celebrate what projects are achieving, recognising and supporting those working in projects and raising awareness in the wider church.
- The economic downturn, spending cuts and the impact of housing benefit reforms are likely to increase homelessness. At the same time, funding from both central and local government and charitable trusts is under pressure. There is therefore a particular need for churches to mobilise their resources to enable more to be done.
- Churches should not underestimate what they can do. The projects visited demonstrate how hundreds of volunteers can be mobilised; the use that can be made of under-utilised premises; the benefits of a personal and non-judgmental approach; and the scope for raising funding and in-kind support. Even small congregations can contribute if they work with others.
- Churches should use their influence with local authorities and others to champion what church-based groups are doing and ensure that they are not overlooked for funding.
- Churches should consider taking a proactive role, not just supporting projects that come forward but working with local authorities and others to identify unmet needs and asking how they might respond. A key part of this might be to bring together groups of churches to pool their strengths to make things happen.
- It is also important to identify and respond to the underlying needs in the community. These can include relationship breakdown, basic parenting and life skills, and lack of work opportunities, as well as a shortage of affordable housing.

BACKGROUND

'Big Society' – enabling local communities to tackle local issues – is a core theme of the Coalition Government. The small, voluntary, church-based projects that Church Urban Fund supports were doing this long before the idea became politically popular.

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This study has been conducted for Housing Justice and Church Urban Fund on a voluntary basis by Neil McDonald who, until March 2011, was a senior civil servant at the Department for Communities and Local Government. He visited nine CUF-supported projects in contrasting areas from the North East to the South West. The selected projects are typical of dozens of similar faith-based projects up and down the country, which provide a range of services for people who are homeless or have other housing-related needs.

Homelessness and housing-related need covers a tremendous spectrum from the several thousand who literally have no roof over their heads and sleep rough, through the hundreds of thousands of 'hidden homeless' who 'sofa surf', sleeping on the couches of friends and families, to those living in overcrowded accommodation – a total of around 1.5 million people. Causes can range from relationship or family breakdown to drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and the simple inability to afford anywhere decent to stay due to high rents and house prices and the shortage of social housing. Whilst the biggest concentrations of rough sleepers may be in London and other large cities, there are significant problems in many other towns and cities.

There are particular issues in 'low demand' areas – areas in which the demand for housing has virtually disappeared due to changing economic conditions and people moving away from the area. Here substantial investment is needed to transform neighbourhoods and create attractive and viable communities.

Some homeless people need support that goes beyond a place to live. These include young people who have become homeless through family breakdown, those with drug and alcohol abuse problems and ex-offenders who need help adjusting to independent living.

PROJECTS

The following projects were visited as part of the study:

- **Harbour Bideford** operates a drop-in centre in North Devon which offers food and companionship to 30-35 people a day, and help accessing support services.
- **The Centre Project** in Leicester uses part of a church hall complex to run drop-in sessions for lonely and vulnerable local residents and for those with learning difficulties, together with a youth club for young unaccompanied asylum seekers from Afghanistan.
- **The Justlife Centre** in East Manchester runs a drop-in centre for clients living in poor quality B&B accommodation nearby, many with drug and alcohol abuse problems. It offers clinics, self management and recovery training, a range of workshops, and support finding accommodation.
- **Wycombe Homeless Connection** offers year-round drop-in sessions, courses and mentoring as well as a night shelter from January to the end of March.
- **Nottingham Nightstop** provides emergency accommodation for 16-25 year olds in the homes of 37 volunteer hosts for up to 10 nights.
- **South Tyneside Churches Key Project** provides a range of services to young homeless people including emergency support packs; floating tenancy support; a prevention of homelessness programme; and supported accommodation for four young people in a redundant vicarage with domestic and life skills training.
- **Cedar Housing Nottingham** runs a 10-bed supported accommodation project for 16-25 year-old women with low-to-medium support needs. There is 24/7 on-site supervision, one-to-one support and residents are encouraged to attend courses or continue in education.

Sally was 16 when her mother met another man via the internet and decided to move to London to live with him. Sally had just four weeks to find somewhere to live.

Cedar House were able to offer her a room and help her claim benefit. She was helped to settle in and start an NVQ Level 2 in health and social care. Sally flourished, getting on well with staff and residents, becoming particularly fond of the gardening project. She was often to be found outside watering the vegetables that would soon be used in shared residents' meals.

Eventually Sally was ready to be independent and Cedar House were able to help her find suitable accommodation. However, she keeps in touch with Cedar House and volunteers in the social care sector. In her own words:

"In the year and a half of living at Cedar I have built up my confidence and I am now comfortable with who I am. For me, Cedar has been the experience of a lifetime and I feel the staff have become part of my life and family. They have been in my life when I was most in need and helped me to work to find my full potential. All in all, I would love to just give something back."

- **St John and St James** is a parish in a highly deprived part of Merseyside which is also an area of low housing demand. It is not so much a project but an example of a local church trying to practice faithfulness and presence in an area of high deprivation and need. The parish works with the school, a local children's charity and other organisations to support the community, particularly vulnerable mothers and children, to build capacity and raise aspirations.
- **House of Heroes**, near Barnstaple, offers supported accommodation in two separate houses in rural North Devon for men and women suffering from homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction and other problems. The houses run a 'therapy to community' programme.

HOW THE PROJECTS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Although these projects are all different, their roots lie in groups or individuals seeing an unmet need and resolving to do something about it. They have learnt from what others have done and put in a great deal of hard work to overcome obstacles and get projects off the ground. In some cases it is remarkable how much has been done with so little. For example, Harbour Bideford refurbished and equipped their premises for just £3,300.

At the heart of each project is a personal, non-judgemental approach. Staff and volunteers give of themselves and have time to spend with clients. For many, this is motivated by their Christian faith; clients are treated as fellow human beings with dignity – typified by the comment, "We won't serve food that we wouldn't eat ourselves or hand out clothes we wouldn't wear ourselves." Another element is a determination to help people move on in their lives, and the belief that that is possible.

The resources within local churches have played a vital role, for example providing accommodation in church halls and redundant vicarages; mobilising volunteers (eg Cedar House tapped 1,600 hours of voluntary labour to refurbish their accommodation), and making financial contributions and contributions in kind (eg the Key Project's emergency packs, including tinned food and toiletries, are donated by church members). It is not just large churches that can make a contribution: some of the churches that provide the night shelter in High Wycombe are relatively small, but are paired with larger suburban congregations.

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HOW CAN THE WIDER CHURCH GET MORE INVOLVED?

- Churches should celebrate what projects are doing, holding events that support and encourage those involved and raise awareness amongst the wider church. The stories are inspirational; they speak for themselves. Poverty and Homelessness Action Week in January is a good opportunity to do this (www.actionweek.org.uk).
- Funding cuts are forcing projects to look critically at where the money goes and to become more efficient. Church members with business or finance expertise could support them in this.
- Making an effective case for continued funding has never been more important. Congregations often include those with knowledge of local government, including local councillors, who could help in presenting the case. There is also a challenge for churches and individuals to increase their own giving to keep projects going.
- Projects are turning people away because they need larger premises or more resources. Churches should consider what they might do, perhaps through even greater use of their premises, mobilising more volunteers, and lobbying local authorities and others to make resources available.
- There is a case for churches taking a proactive role in assessing what needs to be done, in dialogue with their local authorities, and then seeking to encourage the formation of new projects to tackle homelessness. Housing Justice can provide support and advice (www.housingjustice.org.uk).
- Speaking out (in an informed way) about the fundamental issues around homelessness can also make an impact. Those working in projects can help.
- The underlying issues include relationship breakdown, the lack of parenting skills and the absence of a sense of purpose and self worth. These are all issues on which the church has something to say and practical support to offer. More needs to be done to give practical expression to a gospel that says that all are valued in the sight of God.

CHALLENGE

Churches and individuals involved in this work often feel isolated and unsupported by the wider church. The challenge is for every church in every community to play their part by recognising this vital work, and supporting it practically and financially.

To see a short film on how one project is tackling homelessness, and making a real impact in the lives of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, go to www.cuf.org.uk/stories.

For copies of the full report and previous reports, please visit our website at www.cuf.org.uk/research.

Together we can tackle poverty in England

Our vision is for every church in every community to be involved in tackling poverty together by giving time, money, action and prayer. Our aim is to increase the passion within the Church for the poor and marginalised and to make the Church's response more effective.