

## KEY FINDINGS

# THE CHURCH IN ACTION: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHURCH-LED SOCIAL ACTION

Thousands of parish churches around the country play an active role in their local community, running lunch clubs for the elderly, after school clubs for children living in deprived areas or food banks for parents desperately trying to feed their families. These activities, and many others like them, are signs of parish churches quietly serving disadvantaged or vulnerable members of their community. Given the thousands of Anglican churches in England, these kinds of local, community-based activities make a significant contribution to society.

The aim of this short paper is to quantify the scale of Anglican church-led social action in England, to explore the types of activities that parishes run and to identify the social needs they help to address. Our findings are based on the responses of 865 Anglican clergy to a survey undertaken in December 2011. They show that, as the recession continues to bite, many churches around the country are actively addressing the social needs they see around them.

## THE KEY FINDINGS

- 54% of parishes, equating to more than 6,500 of the 12,512 parishes in England, run organised activities to address at least one social need in their community.
- 82% of parishes, equating to more than 10,000, have been asked for help by people in their community and in response have provided informal support.
- Parishes are most likely to support people experiencing isolation and loneliness (40% of parishes organise activities to address this need) and least likely to support those struggling with poor housing or benefit dependency (with just 3% addressing these issues).
- Parishes offer a wide range of activities for their local communities: 69% provide support with school work, 54% offer activities to care for the elderly and 51% run parent and toddler groups.
- Three-quarters of parishes have an 'active and close working relationship' with schools in their area, but fewer than one in five have a similar relationship with the council or the police.

## RESEARCH METHOD

In December 2011 Church Urban Fund, in partnership with the Church of England, sent an online survey to 2,960 incumbents<sup>1</sup>. Incumbents and clergy of incumbent status were targeted to ensure that only one response was returned per parish. Of those invited to take part 865 did so, representing a response rate of 30%.

To test how representative the responses were, key demographic variables were compared with the overall Church of England population. We found there to be a skew away from rural parishes and small churches. This can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that incumbents responsible for multiple parishes were asked to respond on behalf of just one. Since these multiple parishes are most likely to be small or rural, this would result in under-sampling of these types of parish. When generalising our findings this has been adjusted for, by reweighting according to size of congregation. Where results are reported for selected demographic groups (e.g. all parishes over particular income brackets), they have been left unweighted and cannot be generalised to the Church of England as a whole. (Footnotes indicate where unweighted figures have been used.)

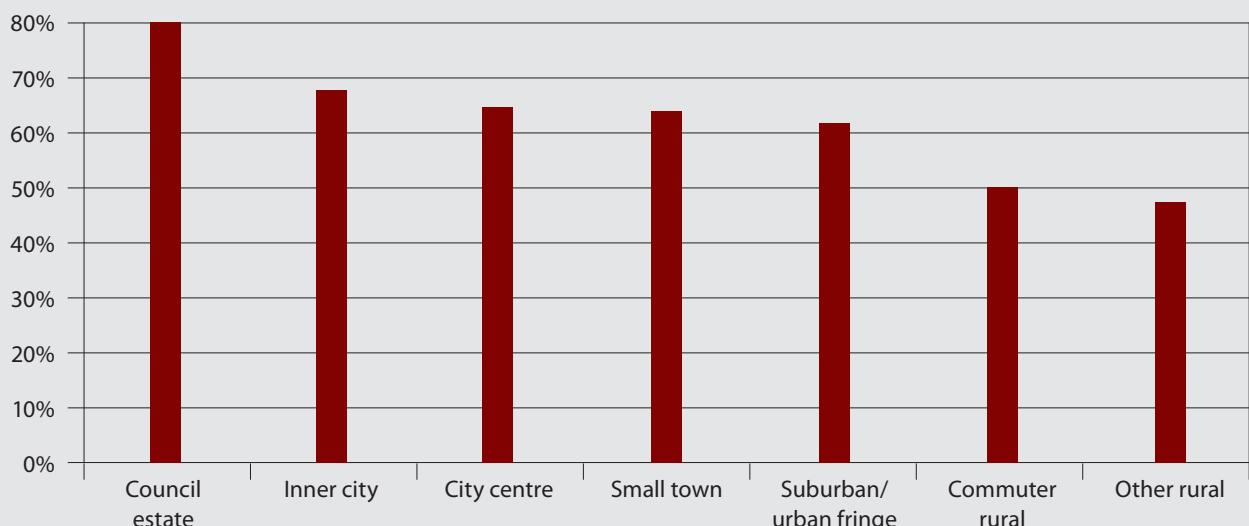
## PARISHES ADDRESSING AT LEAST ONE SOCIAL NEED

Our research found that 54% of parishes (equating to more than 6,500) run at least one organised activity to address a social need in their area, such as loneliness, homelessness, debt, low income or family breakdown. (Figure 2 shows a full list of social needs included in the survey.) Beyond these formal activities, 82% of parishes (equating to more than 10,000) have been asked for help by people living in their community and in response have provided informal support.

Parishes with larger congregations are much more likely to run organised activities: 39% of churches with congregations of fewer than 50 people run at least one activity, compared to 94% of churches with congregations of more than 250.

Within our sample<sup>2</sup>, parishes based on council estates and in the inner city are most likely to be active in the community: 80% of parishes on council estates run activities to address at least one social need, compared to 50% and 47% of parishes in commuter rural and other rural areas respectively.

**Figure 1: Percentage of parishes within our sample based in different areas running organised activities to address at least one social need.**



## PARISHES ADDRESSING MULTIPLE SOCIAL NEEDS

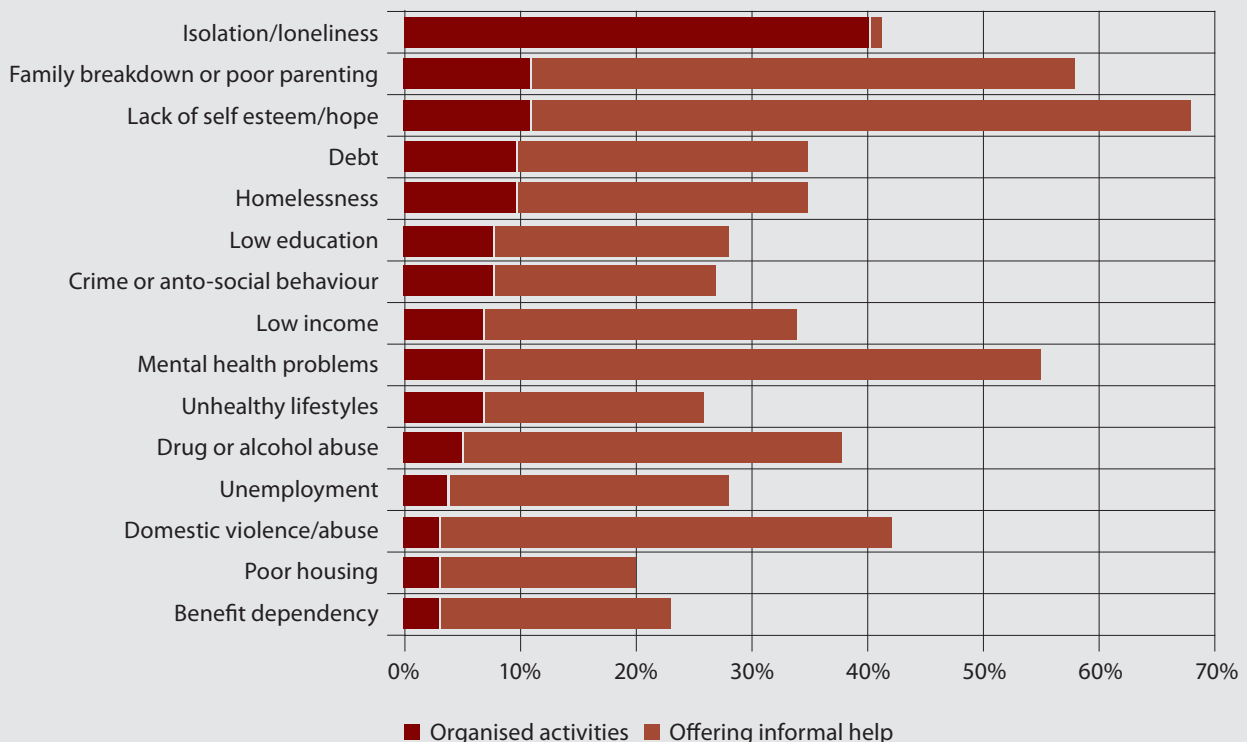
Many parishes are addressing more than one area of need in their community by offering organised activities. Indeed, 9% of parishes address two areas of need, 17% three to six and 3% seven or more. This could mean as many as 400 parishes around the country are tackling seven or more social issues in their local community.

Parishes with larger congregations are much more likely to have an organised response to several areas of social need: 9% of parishes that include churches with fewer than 50 people address three to six areas of need, compared to 48% of parishes with churches of more than 250 people. Amongst survey respondents<sup>3</sup>, 10% of parishes with an income of under £10,000 are addressing three to six needs, compared with 43% of parishes with an income of more than £150,000. Clearly, a parish's income and the size of its congregations present very real limiting factors to the amount of social activity undertaken.

## PARTICULAR SOCIAL NEEDS ADDRESSED BY PARISHES

It is clear that parishes around the country are helping to address a wide range of social needs, both with organised activities and informal help. The graph below shows how parishes are responding to particular needs.

**Figure 2: Percentage of parishes offering organised activities and informal help to address particular social needs in their community**



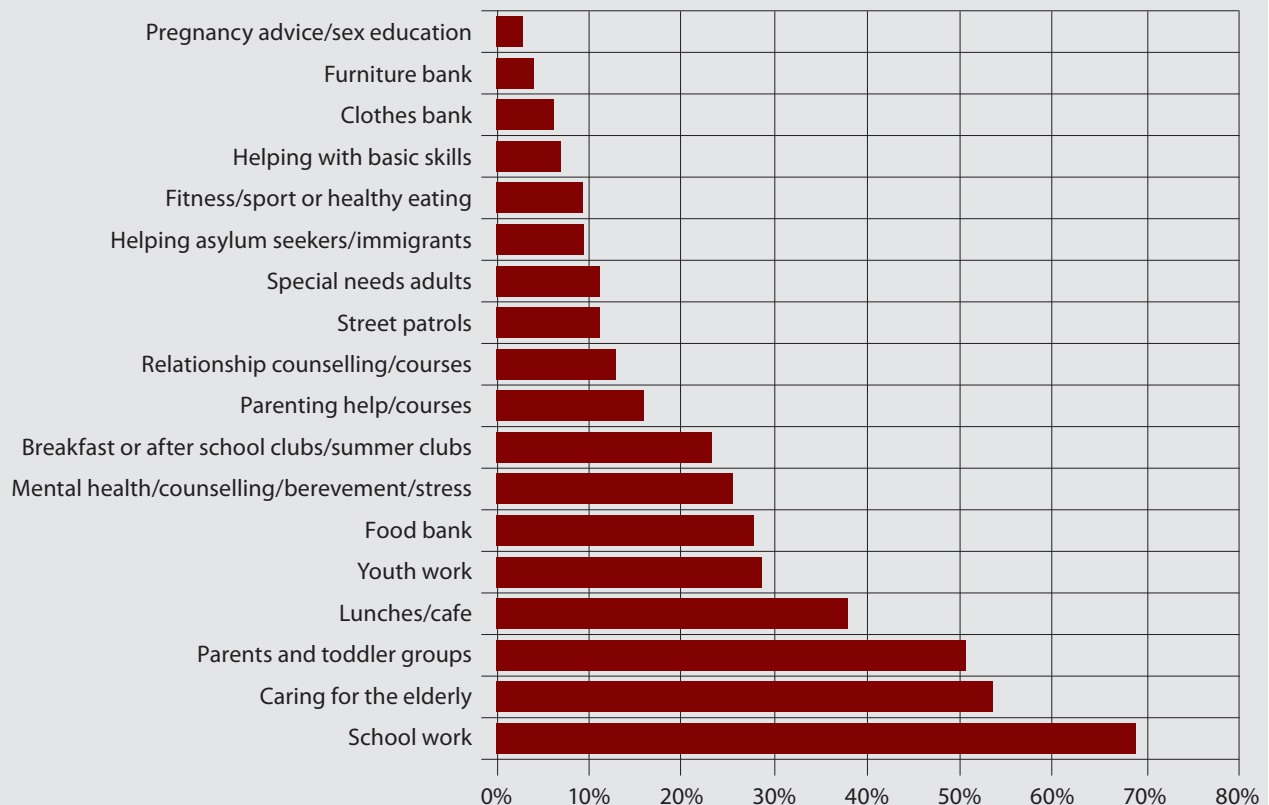
We found that parishes are most likely to offer organised support to people experiencing isolation and loneliness, with 40% of parishes running this type of activity. Indeed, parishes are almost four times more likely to be actively addressing these issues than lack of self-esteem/hope or family breakdown/poor parenting. This could be because clergy recognise that loneliness or isolation is common to a wide variety

of problems and target church-led activities accordingly. A lunch club for the elderly, for example and a night shelter for the homeless can both address loneliness and isolation. These results suggest a common purpose for many church-led social activities. Clergy are helping people to overcome specific problems whilst seeking to build relationships and form a community with those who are lonely or isolated.

With other issues, such as lack of self-esteem or mental health, parishes are more likely to take action in a less organised way. Almost six out of ten (57%) report offering informal help to those struggling with a lack of self-esteem, while just one in ten (11%) provide organised activities. Similarly, almost half (48%) support people with mental health problems informally, but fewer than one in ten (7%) do so through organised activities. Parishes are least likely to support those struggling with poor housing or benefit dependency, with under a quarter offering either organised activities or informal help in this area.

Respondents were also asked whether or not their parish was involved in offering specific types of activities that might help those in their community affected by poverty.

**Figure 3: Percentage of parishes running specific types of activities<sup>4</sup>**



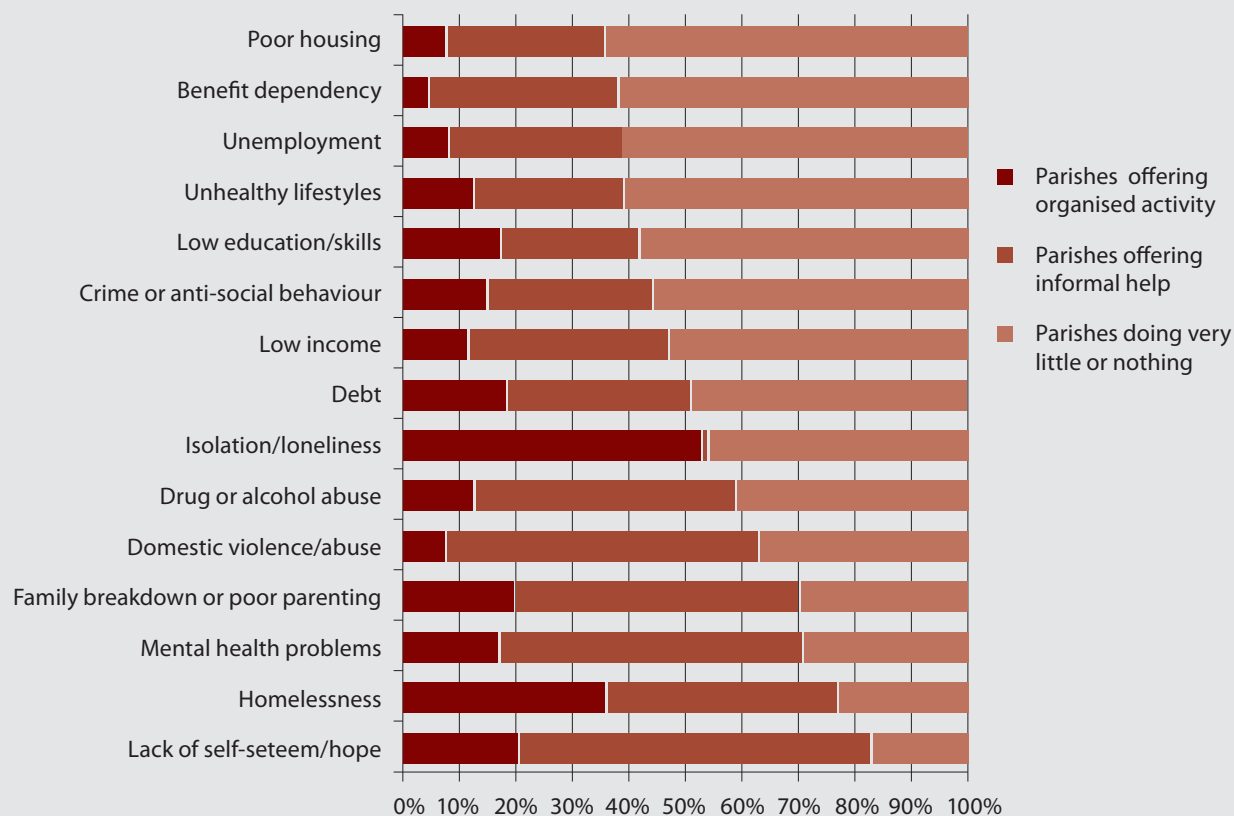
These responses indicate, again, that churches are very active in their local communities: 69% of parishes are providing support with school work, 54% offer activities to care for the elderly and 51% are running parent and toddler groups.

Church leaders were also asked if there were other specific ways in which they served their communities. Most reiterated the activities shown above but some mentioned the provision of night shelters, support for local charities and community projects and making premises available for community use.

## IDENTIFYING THE GAPS IN PROVISION

It appears that parishes feel more able to respond to certain social needs than others. For example, 84% of the respondents<sup>5</sup> who identified lack of self-esteem/hope as a 'major' or 'significant' problem in their parish, were addressing that need with organised activities or informal help. Just 16% were doing nothing or very little. On the other hand, only 36% of those who saw poor housing as a 'major' or 'significant' problem in their parish, were offering any form of help and 64% were doing little if anything.

**Figure 4: Percentage of parishes offering organised activities, informal help or doing little/nothing to address problems identified as 'major' or 'significant' in their parish**



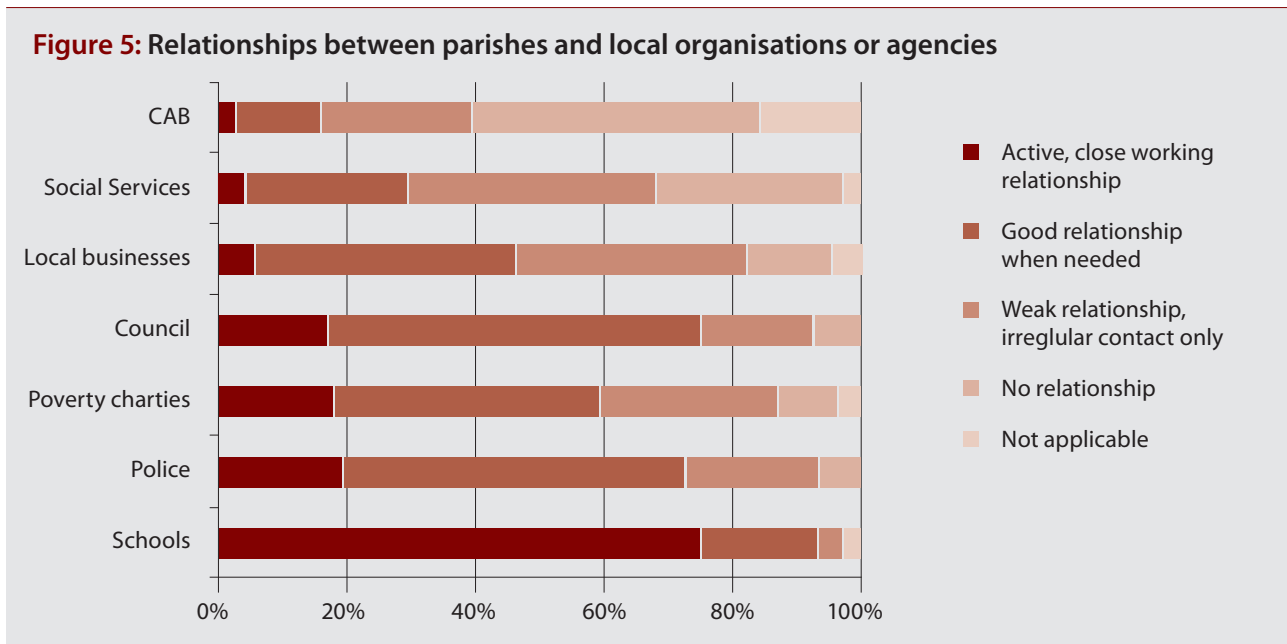
## WORKING CLOSELY WITH OTHERS

In conducting this survey, we also sought to discover the extent to which parishes were working in partnership with other organisations and agencies in their community. We found that three-quarters of parishes have an 'active and close working relationship' with local schools. This correlates with the high number of parishes supporting children with their school work and indicates a strong focus for church-led community work on children and education.

In contrast, fewer than one in five parishes reported an 'active and close working relationship' with the council or the police and fewer than one in ten reported a close relationship with local businesses, social services or the local Citizens Advice Bureau. These low figures perhaps represent a missed opportunity for churches wishing to support those in poverty. Closer working relationships with key local agencies might help parishes to provide more targeted and strategic support for their parishioners.

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**Figure 5: Relationships between parishes and local organisations or agencies**



## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings show that thousands of parishes around the country are actively addressing the social needs of their local communities, providing extremely valuable support for those experiencing difficulty in a time of recession. In particular, the role of churches in addressing loneliness and social isolation should be recognised and valued. More effort, however, needs to go into thinking about how they might fill the gaps identified in this report, tackling issues such as poor housing, benefit dependency and unemployment. Closer working relationships with local councils, the police, social services or the local Citizens Advice Bureau could perhaps offer a significant and strategic way forward.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This report was authored by Bethany Eckley at Church Urban Fund. A copy of the report is available to download at [www.cuf.org.uk/research](http://www.cuf.org.uk/research). We would like to thank Louise McFerran from the Research and Statistics department of the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England for her support in conducting this research.

### Endnotes

- 1 'Incumbent' is the title given to the member of clergy responsible for the parish.
- 2 These figures are not reweighted according to congregation size, so cannot be generalised to the whole of the Church of England.
- 3 These figures are not reweighted according to congregation size, so cannot be generalised to the whole of the Church of England.
- 4 According to the figure above, 28% of parishes run food banks. Trussell Trust, just one Christian charity that works with churches to set up food banks, claims to have grown at a rate of three a week over the last year (figure quoted in their General Food Bank Appeal 2012). Given this rapid increase, we may assume that the percentage of parishes running food banks is now higher than 28%.
- 5 These figures are not reweighted according to congregation size, so cannot be generalised to the whole of the Church of England.

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