

LISTEN UP!

CONNECTING CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES THROUGH LISTENING

Executive Summary

Listening is a crucial first step for any activity that seeks to tackle poverty. It is important for challenging preconceptions, breaking down barriers between people and creating spaces in which friendship can grow.

This report tells the story of one church that undertook a listening exercise to inform and shape their work in the community. In their listening, the group used a process called *Listen Up!*, designed to help churches conduct in-depth conversations with individuals or households.

In this summary, the group briefly explain how the listening was done, what was heard and, finally, what the group will do as a result. We hope that this will be a useful resource for other churches seeking to listen to, connect with and support people in their communities.

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 approach¹ 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 felt that *Listen Up!* would allow us to build on this work.

The *Listen Up!* process was designed by the Diocese of Sheffield to help church groups hold in-depth and participatory conversations with people in their community.² These conversations 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 of the process is to identify the things that need to change in order for people's livelihoods to become more sustainable, secure and less vulnerable to unexpected shocks.

The process is made up of six stages: setting objectives, establishing the team, mapping the local context, conducting household interviews, analysis and identifying and taking action. For an explanation of how we prepared and conducted the interviews, please see the full report at www.cuf.org.uk/listenup.

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As a group, we decided we wanted to listen to working-age adults (not pensioners or children) on a low income because we wanted to learn about issues around employment and working-age benefits. We also selected and developed four interactive tools that we used during the interviews to help stimulate conversation and record information.

In total, we were able to hold five interviews with local residents, spending up 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. Whilst we are not able to say for certain how many people experience a particular issue, this exercise allows us to identify common themes and gain a deeper insight into the lives of our neighbours, enabling us to work alongside them and support them to a greater extent.

WHAT WE HEARD

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 more activity going on in a household – the more visitors or the more trips out – the better people felt about their social assets. People really valued their relationships, not least because a good social network made life easier, providing support when shocks came along. For example, one participant 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 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 people talked about their mobile phone and access to the internet as among their most important physical assets. Apparently this was because they allowed them to keep in contact with friends and family that they didn't often get to see. It became clear that one of the benefits of coming to our church drop-in was to use the free wifi connection.

The tools we used highlighted the very tight margins that most participants 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 people paid their regular bills first, before spending whatever was left on other essentials including food, phone and nappies; luxuries would only be bought afterwards. Several knew their incomings and outgoings down to the pound.

Throughout the interviews it became obvious that no-one 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.

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.

The participant who had been made redundant was able to cope with that situation because he had a redundancy package and an inheritance to draw upon. These enabled him to continue living in the same house without needing to look for other work. As he was deeply embedded in the church community and, as he didn't have to work, he was now volunteering a lot of his time to support community activities. Not only was he supported by his own assets but, because of that, was able to build assets in the wider community.

In another interview we saw how, without assets, shocks can pile one on top of another, creating a snowball effect. One participant experienced poor health that was followed by an unexpected change to benefits. This threw off balance his efforts to budget properly, led to him getting into debt and caused a great deal of stress and anxiety. He commented, 'Generally my benefits are enough to cover my outgoings, but if something happens, I struggle to budget for it as I don't have enough money to save.' In this particular situation, our church had been able to begin the process of rebuilding this person's assets; without this intervention, his situation would probably have further deteriorated.

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 their public assets, their access to local transport and services, people raised several issues for discussion. Firstly, all participants 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.

Secondly, one participant 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.

Thirdly, people talked about the lack of support 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, but is also a result of the lack of services, many of which have been affected by recent funding cuts. We believe that it is crucial to explore this issue further with residents beyond *Listen Up!*

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CONCLUSION

The *Listen Up!* process has given us an important insight into the lives and livelihoods of people in our community and 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.

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.

Thirdly, we have understood more about the lack of local support services, the inaccessibility of services that exist elsewhere in the city 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 sends a powerful message that says every single person has something to share and contribute. 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.

For us, this report is one step in a much longer process. Next, we will bring participants together, to share our reflections and discuss follow-up. We will also explore the possibility of involving them in acting and advocating for change on some of the issues which have emerged. 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. 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.

You can read the full report at: www.cuf.org.uk/listenup

1 For more information, see www.cuf.org.uk/ABCD.

2 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. See more at www.church-poverty.org.uk/listenup.

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Registered Charity number 297483