

TACKLING POVERTY TOGETHER: IMPACT REPORT OF THE TOGETHER NETWORK

Church Urban Fund exists to tackle poverty in this country. We do this by working through churches and local projects to build communities where people can flourish and thrive because they are embedded in networks of supportive relationships; they have access to sufficient resources to take hold of opportunities; and they are confident in their own ability to respond to and overcome challenges.

Many churches and local projects are already doing fantastic work– offering material support to those in need and also creating places and spaces for relationships to grow. Yet, we know that it can be a struggle to continue this work as a result of insufficient resources, a lack of confidence or the difficulty of coordinating with others running similar activities locally. Our aim is to help churches and other local organisations be more effective, sustainable and better resourced in their activities to tackle poverty.

At the heart of our work is the Together Network - a network of Joint Ventures between Church Urban Fund and individual dioceses. This Network has three main objectives:

- To grow the number of church-based social activities, helping churches to tackle poverty and build strong, flourishing communities
- To develop people's capacity to take effective action to tackle poverty
- To build partnerships and collaborative working between churches and with other organisations in order to increase joined-up working and innovation.

The Together Network has grown rapidly in recent years and is now operating around the country, each Joint Venture employing Development Workers to provide support that is targeted and responsive to local needs. It is very important to us that we understand the impact of the Network - the extent to which we are effectively supporting churches in their community activities, and the way in which these activities are helping to transform the lives of the poorest and most marginalised in this country.

This report gives a snapshot of the work undertaken by the Together Network between January 2013 and June 2014. It explains the type of activities being carried out and the impact of those activities.

Bringing together an external evaluation done by the Charities Evaluation Services¹ and our own internal monitoring, this report shows that the Network is supporting a significant number of churches and organisations, helping them to unlock financial, physical and human resources to tackle poverty and transform lives.

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1. GROWING CHURCH-BASED SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Over the last 18 months, the Together Network has provided one-to-one support to many churches and community organisations, helping them to develop new activities to support people in their areas. This includes helping the Italian Mission in Bradford to provide weekly hot meals to 80 vulnerable people, enabling St. Hilda's in the Middlesbrough area to continue their work with 70 local young people and helping Mansfield Baptist Church to set up a Winter Night shelter, providing 83 nights off the street.

In-depth support is provided by our Development Workers, who offer organisations help with strategic planning, governance and fundraising for their social action projects. People from these organisations have stressed the role that Development Workers play as facilitators and catalysts – helping to unlock ideas, skills and developments at an individual, group and community level. A trustee of the Camborne food bank explained, *'They talk to you face to face, try and work out where gaps are in your thinking and suggest how you might fill those gaps.'*

Development Workers also help people apply for funding for specific activities. Over the last 18 months, they have helped to submit over 180 funding applications, which have raised over £1 million for local action.

With churches able to provide space and volunteers, often a little funding is able to unlock real positive change, increasing access to physical and people resources. For example, one church in Newcastle wanted to help to set up a toddler group. The local Development Worker helped the church secure a small amount of funding to pay for a 10-week secondment of a schools worker. This worker used their expertise to establish the group and the church now has about seven families coming along on a regular basis.

According to the research done by Charities Evaluation Services (CES), one of the main outcomes of our in-depth support has been the increase in volunteer time, energy and commitment. This change has often come about as a result of churches being encouraged to think about their relationship to their local community. For example, with support from the local Development Worker, the small and elderly congregation of St Anne's in Moseley re-examined its mission programme and decided to host the newly planned Birmingham Winter Night Shelter. In the first year, 15 volunteers worked in shifts to provide hot meals; they continued into the second year of the project with an excess of volunteers.

CASE STUDY

The new vicar in Longbenton approached Together Newcastle (our Joint Venture with the Diocese of Newcastle) for help in re-engaging the church with its local community. As the area has high levels of poverty and very few meeting places, she wanted to re-develop the run-down church hall in order to make it more accessible for the community.

The Development Worker met with the vicar and the congregation several times, helping them to think about their mission in the area and secure funds to refurbish the building.

Following its redevelopment, the church hall now hosts several weekly community activities including a youth club, community open day, lunch club and community choir. These activities enable people from the local community to meet and get to know one another, helping to reduce isolation and tackle poverty of relationship. The vicar reflected, 'I really don't know where I would have begun without [the Development Worker]... he was a guardian angel at the end of a telephone call.'

2. INCREASING CAPACITY TO TAKE EFFECTIVE ACTION

As well as encouraging the development of new activities, the Network also aims to build the capacity of churches and local organisations to take effective action to tackle poverty. As such, Development Workers run workshops, courses and events to inform people about poverty-related issues, share best-practice responses and enable practitioners to develop new skills. Over the last 18 months, the Network has taken part in more than 415 events, attended by almost 8,000 people.

In Cornwall, the Joint Venture has hosted several 'Meet the Funder' events in which over 300 church leaders and staff of community organisations have met with funders and received training on how to write effective funding applications. One attendee commented, *'[This event has] given me so much more confidence to go ahead and the knowledge of the sort of skills needed.'*

In Liverpool, the Development Worker organised a city-wide conference to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by asylum seekers in the city; in Middlesbrough the Joint Venture hosted the Bridges of Hope conference that brought together local churches and organisations and raised awareness of the issues faced by local people. Elsewhere, other Joint Ventures have hosted briefing sessions to build understanding and awareness of topics such as welfare reform, food poverty and credit unions.

The CES research found that the Joint Ventures had been instrumental in building confidence and encouraging people to 'have a go'. The vicar of St Bartholomew's in Newbiggin commented, *'As a partner in this whole thing, [the Development Worker] gives confidence and sense of possibility. He gives some practical and tangible ideas that we can try to work with.'*

The Together Network also aims to encourage a change in the missional thinking of local churches, increasing their commitment to social transformation. In Birmingham, this has occurred through the 'Know Your Church, Know Your Neighbourhood' course - a facilitated process designed to help churches make prayerful and informed decisions about their mission in their communities.

Taking part in this course often gives churches the encouragement they need to take action; for example, at the end of the course, St John's church in Ladywood decided that they wanted to be a more welcoming church and so would now take part in the community fun day. This has since become an integral part of their mission in the neighbourhood.

3. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIVE WORKING

A fundamental aim of the Together Network is to bring people together to work collaboratively to tackle poverty - we believe we are all more effective when we work together. As such, a key part of our work is to develop partnerships between churches, and between churches and other organisations, in order to increase joined-up responses, enable innovative ways of working and ensure people feel supported in their efforts to tackle poverty.

The Network is currently working with more than 320 different partners and has supported almost 200 projects that have brought together multiple churches or organisations. One example of such a project took place in Birmingham. Aston United Reformed Church had offered their building as a venue for the Winter Night Shelter, but were concerned that they would not find sufficient volunteers from their small congregation to make it work; however, with support from the local Joint Venture they were able to identify enough volunteers in other churches to run the project successfully.

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The Winter Night Shelter, developed and supported by our Joint Venture in Birmingham, was highlighted by one interviewee as a great example of ecumenical working: *'When you get people involved in a project they are passionate about, that's when [ecumenism] works... Sharing resources, being the living embodiment of the people of God, where it's not about 'this church does it all and aren't they great', but actually sharing resources with one another.'*

We also seek to build partnerships between churches and other organisations, including charities, service providers and local government. In Lancashire, the Joint Venture has set up the Blackpool Food Partnership, which brings together a number of churches that are involved in food banks, making sure that their efforts are coordinated with each other and linked up with other charities working in this area. In Middlesbrough, the Development Worker joined a working group to oversee the redevelopment of a Catholic community centre. As part of this working group, they helped to make connections with other organisations supporting homeless people that were in need of premises and as a result, the building is now fully occupied.

CASE STUDY

The 'Places of Welcome' project was one of the key outcomes of Birmingham city's Social Inclusion Process. The aim of the project is to establish places where isolated and vulnerable people can be welcomed and supported. Thrive Together Birmingham (our Joint Venture with the Diocese of Birmingham) has been instrumental in developing this project.

Over the last year, Thrive has drawn on its contacts from the faith and voluntary sector to identify potential partners, secure their participation, deliver training sessions for network members and facilitate the development of a Charter of Welcome.

There are currently 23 active Places of Welcome across the city including several churches, a Gudwara, a residents association and a convent; a further 30 organisations are exploring the possibility of joining the network. Thrive continues to identify new partners and is currently developing a Places of Welcome website that will allow people who are new to the city to find out where they can receive a warm welcome.

CONCLUSION

The Together Network has grown rapidly over the last few years and has begun to clearly demonstrate its value in supporting local churches and organisations, enabling and encouraging them to 'have a go' and do something both creative and effective in their community. Over the next year, we hope to grow and further consolidate this work, helping to transform the lives of the poorest and most marginalised in this country.

¹ To see the full evaluation report please visit www.cuf.org.uk/impact