ADDRESSING POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Supporting churches to love and serve their communities during COVID-19 and beyond

DIOCESE *of* OXFORD

The Diocese of Oxford is the Church of England in Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

Together, we are the Church, called and sent by God as disciples of Jesus Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. We are a living, growing network of more than a thousand congregations, chaplaincies and schools.

Together, we are called to be more Christ-like: to be the Church of the Beatitudes: contemplative, compassionate and courageous for the sake of God's world.

Together, we work with God and with others for the common good in every place in one of the great crossroads of the world.

Together, we are called to proclaim the Christian faith afresh in this generation with joy and hope and love.

Together, we are called to dream dreams and see visions of what could be and see those visions come to birth.

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Preface

The imperative for Christian communities to engage in social action and social justice lies at the heart of our faith. *Addressing Poverty and Inequality* **explores specific questions around the Church's engagement with poverty and inequality in the Diocese of Oxford.**

On taking up his post in 2016, Bishop Steven Croft named 'poverty and marginalisation' as one of his three key personal priorities for the Diocese of Oxford. Key milestones along the way have been the *For Richer For Poorer* report (2017) and the five-year financial investment in Community Organising, beginning in 2019.

Addressing specific questions of poverty and inequality is one of five areas of focus underpinning our common vision to become a more Christ-like Church: contemplative, compassionate and courageous for the sake of God's world.

God is already at work through more than a thousand churches, chaplaincies and schools in this diocese. Much is already being done to respond to the injustices of poverty and inequality but the COVID-19 pandemic, a difficult winter and the likely recessionary pressures that could follow will only exacerbate existing inequalities across our diocese and the rest of the UK, creating new challenges for our churches and the communities they seek to serve.

At a time when our churches are having to radically adapt to a shifting context for mission and ministry in terms of needs, practice and resources, the pandemic has also drawn our attention to new and heightened forms of poverty and inequality.

This report explores what we have discovered during the pandemic and how that learning might inform the mission and ministry of our churches in future. The authors, through face to face meetings and online surveys, have gathered information about what is happening right now, on the ground.

The pages that follow profile emerging and systemic issues around poverty and inequality and suggest how best to bring diocesan influence to bear. The authors explore how we can improve our understanding of community networking opportunities; how churches come to know community/voluntary sector infrastructure in a local area and connect with it.

And we need to redouble our efforts to tell the story of what is already happening through our churches; mapping key projects and examples of good practice across the diocese. There is much our churches can learn from one another.

Despite all that has changed, and is changing, it remains the case that our churches are embedded in every community across the Thames Valley. We are uniquely positioned to be alongside and with marginalised people, to hear the needs, and to mobilise community-wide engagement in social action and in campaigns for social justice.

Introduction

The Diocese of Oxford has always prioritised issues of poverty and marginalisation through its social justice work. A Poverty and Inequality Steering Group, formed in October 2020, seeks to address specific questions of poverty and inequality as part of our common vision for a more Christ-like Church.

This report has been prepared by Jane Perry, a social and missiological research consultant, and the Revd. Liz Jackson. It presents a summary of the themes that emerged out of a targeted consultation across the diocese.

A targeted consultation across the diocese

The Poverty and Inequality Steering Group wanted to hear directly from churches about the challenges they face in their communities (relating to poverty and deprivation); how they have responded to these, and what we could all learn.

Thirty in-depth, structured conversations were held with leaders from churches across the diocese. The churches were selected to represent a spread of areas and characteristics, prioritising places which score highly according to official measures of multiple deprivation and child/pensioner poverty. These extended conversations were complemented by a short survey, which was made widely available across diocesan channels.

This initial phase of research aimed to:

- gather information about the reality of poverty and inequality on the ground in 2021

- profile emerging and systemic issues, and see how the diocese can best influence these

- improve diocesan understanding of community networking – exploring how churches can connect better with the local community and the voluntary sector

- tell the story of what is already happening through our churches – by mapping key projects and examples of good practice across the diocese.

More detail about the research methodology and its conceptual basis, including definitions of community engagement, can be found in the Appendix.

Where the research will lead

The material gathered is intended to clarify future action on poverty and inequality in the diocese, and to inspire responses that will inform, connect, enable and help churches to promote issues and actions to address this in their communities. It is hoped this research will lead to:

Better understanding

Helping churches (congregations and leaders) to better understand a) their locations and local contexts, b) the features of different aspects of poverty and c) how to hear, listen, and respond to the voices of those most affected by poverty.

At the same time, helping the diocese, and others, to understand the challenges that churches and communities face, including the combinations of stress factors that create fragility and vulnerability for individuals and communities.

Making connections

Helping churches find out who else is working on the issues that concern them. And helping the diocese support churches to increase their social capital, and the social capital of individuals, by connecting people across different areas.

Tackling practical challenges

Supporting churches to engage with their communities using tools, such as 'how to' videos covering tasks and challenges that they face in common. Also supporting the diocese, by investing in training and support – for example community organising, and Appreciative Inquiry.

Speaking out

Helping churches connect with wider campaigns that they might get involved with; supporting networking, organising and other efforts to address systemic injustice. The diocese can help identify existing resources, for example the Parish Planning Tool, and other crossover initiatives, which will help identify existing strengths, and focus new efforts, avoiding the risk of taking on too much at once.

Key assumptions about poverty

This project rests on some key assumptions about poverty and church social engagement:

- Poverty is about income, but also more than income – a web of interlinked factors relating to economic position, material conditions and social relationships that together have a significant impact on an individual's ability to flourish.

- Parishes and neighbourhoods are influenced by how many of the local community are living on very low and insecure incomes (as a proportion of the population) but also by the level of economic inequality (the distribution or spread across the income distribution) in their area. In addition, it is well established that income inequality intersects with a range of other inequalities, including race, gender, disability, and class.

- The pandemic is likely to have had a significant interaction with, and lasting impact on, economic inequality – through uneven income distribution, duration and scale of impact on different sectors of the economy and through low-income families being most likely to have seen their household finances squeezed.[1]

- When discussing church social action in areas of poverty and marginalisation, this report favours the term 'social (or community) engagement', placing emphasis on outward-looking, receptive interaction as a two-way process in which churches both serve and receive from their communities (see the Appendix for further discussion).

Since March 2020, churches have been called to respond to unprecedented times in unprecedented ways.[2] There is plenty we can learn from their experiences – both affirming and more challenging.

Key themes emerging from the consultation

Five themes emerged from the research:

1. **Local context matters** – Experiences of poverty and inequality differ according to context. Churches must listen and adapt to their community; there is no one model for community engagement.

2. **There are ongoing challenges and complexities caused by COVID-19** – The church-led response during the pandemic was vast and varied and generally shaped around pre-existing posture. Ongoing concerns exist, but the impact of the pandemic may not yet be fully realised.

3. **There are hopes but also many fears about the future** – The pandemic has brought new opportunities to connect with communities, but also uncertainty about long-term impacts. There are fears over disconnection with the local community and church members, and ongoing concerns about resources.

4. **There are opportunities for diocesan support** – Churches would like more help knowing how to engage with addressing poverty and inequality, and support to act with confidence.

5. **There are learnings about mission** – Reflections provided a wealth of expertise and experience on mission with a focus on poverty and inequality. Community engagement during the pandemic was found to have flourished under common characteristics.

From these themes and the responses that led to them, important topics for further discussion and future change have emerged. Church engagement with poverty and inequality is at its best when people know how to engage (awareness, skills and experience) and feel able to engage (capacity and confidence). This provides clear direction for the future work of the Steering Group as it seeks to inform, enable, promote and connect the work of churches in longing to see the Kingdom come across the diocese.

Local context

Summary

Experiences of income poverty and economic deprivation differ considerably according to the socio-economic make-up of a community. How churches respond will inevitably be shaped by their context.

Every church operates within a unique geographical, historical, socio-economic and cultural, as well as ecclesiological, position. Furthermore, contexts change rapidly, whether through demographic shifts, the availability of new housing or because the population is transient. These factors can present considerable challenges to communities and to the churches seeking to serve them.

In trying to understand this, seven broad environments have been discerned:

1. **Predominantly affluent:** Little/no personal contact with issues of financial hardship.
2. **Hidden poverty:** Where affluent appearances could be hiding economic struggle.
3. **Diverse and socially mixed:** Particular challenges associated with stark extremes of inequality.
4. **Pockets of poverty:** Discrete, identifiable areas where deprivation is high, compared to the surrounding areas.
5. **Rural poverty:** Specific difficulties with accessing services and costs of living that relate to rural locations.
6. **Large outer-estates:** More extensive, acknowledged deprivation.
7. **Urban centres:** Also with more extensive, acknowledged deprivation.

Future action on poverty in the diocese, through the work of the steering group, will need to engage with the breadth of these environments, and support churches to listen and adapt to their local context. There may be potential benefits of connecting like-with-like, so that churches can share common experience, but also in connecting across difference – gaining support and strength by partnering with those in quite different contexts.

Key findings about local community context

Participants were asked to describe their local community. The significance and nuance of local context, in shaping how churches engage with their communities, was powerfully demonstrated by the considerable variation in the answers given by survey respondents, elaborated on in the in-depth conversations.

> **"Livelihoods have been badly affected. Those on the margins of society have nowhere to go."**

In line with the data in the diocese's 2017 report on poverty and livelihoods in the diocese, *For Richer, For Poorer*,[3] participants' responses revealed the range, richness and complex identity and outlook of communities – and therefore context – across the Diocese of Oxford.

1. Every church operates within, from and into a unique local context.

Participants' descriptions of their local communities illustrated how context is a complex web of factors which shape the identity and outlook of a place, including:

- **Geographical** This includes the type of area (rural villages, market towns, sub-urban and urban large estates, and city centres), but also location, in relation to other urban areas, travel links, etc.
- **Historical** Reasons for settlement development have a considerable and long-lasting legacy for the local population, even (perhaps especially) when the original reasons for communities forming have been superseded.
- **Cultural background and mix of population** – most prevalent where ethnic diversity is high, but still a factor even where it isn't. All churches are shaped by cross-cuttings of class, education and ethnic identities

in their congregations and the communities they serve. Some churches are adept at providing places for those from different backgrounds to meet and mix, others struggle to know how to connect with those who are different from them.

- **Socio-economic** Resulting from other contextual factors, outlined above, socio-economic context is also shaped by the local economic profile (particularly the types of industries and jobs) and housing types, availability, and cost.

- **Ecclesiological** The history and identity of a local church, shaped by the theological predisposition of its congregations and clergy, can be a significant factor in shaping the interaction of the church community with the local context.

2. Rapid change can present considerable challenges to communities and churches seeking to serve them.

Factors that lead to a rapidly changing population include:

- **Demographic change** This includes increasing elderly populations (as younger families move out) and changing socio-demographics – due to changes in transport links/accessibility and shifting house prices.

> **"With so much brand-new housing being built, lots of people are moving in at a time when it's difficult to create any sense of community."**

- **Impact of new housing** New housing can bring in completely new populations, sometimes with very long-lasting effects on the make-up of the local area. It can present particular challenges to established communities and to those seeking to reach new communities, particularly at this time:

  "With so much brand-new housing being built, lots of people are moving in at a time when it's difficult to create any sense of community – it's hard to tell what impact this will have on the development of these new communities post-Covid."

- **Transience** Areas with highly mobile populations will feel quite different and have different needs from those where populations are more established. High turnover, in local population and in churches, can present particular challenges for church/congregational growth and development, and for community engagement.

Each sort of change presents different challenges, requiring churches to adopt different postures and approaches in response. This was a source of concern to some participants (see 'Hopes and fears', page 19).

3. Church engagement with issues of poverty and inequality will, inevitably, be shaped by context.

The open questions in the online survey revealed a staggering variety of responses. Most, but not all, respondents were able to describe their communities in considerable detail. Where respondents were less able to do this, this was often an acknowledgement of the limit of their knowledge – for example being new to, or living outside, the parish.

Summarising descriptions of different communities in a meaningful way was difficult. However, a range of categories could be discerned relating to experience of/contact with income poverty and economic deprivation:

- **Predominantly, even exclusively, affluent** If a congregation and the community from which it is predominantly drawn has little or no personal contact with issues of financial hardship, this will inevitably shape their outlook – "Hidden poverty not recognised by many in the wider community, some doubt about poverty and inability to pay for basic needs". Churches in these areas may need support to look outside of their own experience and to learn about, and empathise with, those whose experience is vastly different from their own.

- **Hidden poverty** Some respondents identified issues with hidden poverty, indicating that affluent appearances could be hiding economic struggle – "More deprivation than might be immediately evident, especially among families who have lived here for generations".

Poverty can be hidden by individuals who do not want to reveal their situation because of shame or stigma, but also through high levels of personal debt, which allow outward appearances to remain affluent even where there is financial struggle.

> **'Hidden poverty… unseen issues and doubt about people's inability to pay for basic needs.'**

Other respondents reflected how poverty can also be hidden at a societal level, either because pockets of deprivation are kept out of sight or through the mixed nature of communities:

"We have a significant number of people living in poverty, and issues with domestic abuse in particular, though in Milton Keynes these issues are well hidden by the way the housing is built (no big estates, etc)."

A man begs at the entrance to a supermarket as shoppers walk by

Identifying and responding appropriately to hidden poverty can present particular challenges, and often benefits from approaches that seek to serve and include all, while also supporting those in need.

- **Diverse, socially mixed** Some socially mixed areas display stark extremes of inequality – "Inequality is particularly marked by the juxtaposition of the most wealthy and the most deprived" – while, in others, economic differences are still significant but less marked: "[An] above-average percentage of professionals create inequality, compared with a working but not deprived population".

Inequality in mixed areas affects individual experience for those on lower incomes: "Most people who live here are comfortably off, which means it is a difficult place to be poor or unemployed".

Also, the experience of bringing together or serving a community with vastly different backgrounds and life experiences can bring challenges in terms of prejudice and division. Churches in these areas may have particularly valuable experience (as well as ongoing struggles) with how to create spaces of connection across social divides.

- **Pockets of poverty** Although in many ways a sub-set of 'mixed areas with high inequality', particular issues were identified where parishes had discrete areas that were distinctively more deprived than surrounding areas. These pockets are often linked

to housing (sometimes larger areas of purpose-built council housing built some time ago), but also smaller, more isolated, collections of units within newer developments.

Such pockets of poverty may increase stigma, perceived or real, associated with low income. Some churches, particularly those where congregations are drawn from more affluent areas, may struggle to connect with those living in areas with distinctively lower incomes.

- **Rural poverty** Rural communities can face difficulties with accessing services and higher costs of living, as a result of their location (for example, higher travel costs or more expensive heating bills). Difficulties accessing services demonstrates how there are other forms of poverty apart from purely financial, although these are also often worse for those on lower incomes.

> **"Most people who live here are comfortably off… it is a difficult place to be poor."**

Rural poverty can also be associated with being 'asset rich but cash poor' (e.g. older people who own their own homes but are now living on lower incomes; or intergenerationally, where younger families inherit property that does not reflect their cash income) and also where livelihoods can be

comfortable yet also financially precarious (e.g. tenant farmers, tied cottages rented to employees in return for labour, etc).

- Finally, although extensive, visible deprivation is rare across the Diocese of Oxford, it is not unknown and is characterised by two contrasting types of urban poverty: **large outer estates** (large areas of housing, often with intergenerational poverty) and that found in **urban centres** (even in smaller cities):

"On the face of it Reading is an affluent town. However, this part of Reading is high on the national list of areas of deprivation… Reading is also a registered town of sanctuary and therefore receives refugees and asylum seekers. Homelessness is high, including those in temporary housing. The level of poverty in the area has resulted in drug-dealing and high numbers of street workers. There is insufficient affordable housing and the number of people whose lives are affected by mental health challenges is extremely high. There is a rise in the number of people dependent on food banks."

This span of experience across the diocese can, to some extent, be illustrated through local area or parish statistics, particularly for places where deprivation is particularly high or where consistently low levels of deprivation can be taken to indicate affluence. However, statistics report an average rather than reflecting micro-local differentials, so can mask deprivation.

For further discussion

As a result of participants' feedback on local context, the following topics would seem valuable for further discussion:

- **Context matters.** Churches will respond very differently to initiatives, depending on their experience and local area. Similarly, different contexts require differing responses – there is no 'one-size-fits-all'. Any diocese-wide prescription may be weakened if it fails to take local variation into account. Is it possible to design targeted support/responses?

- **Listening to and adapting to context is key.** There appear to be many examples of listening well to local context across the diocese, but this remains a skill that must be learnt and fostered – for congregations as well as for clergy. This is perhaps particularly true where context appears to be self-evident (where churches may forget, or not realise, that not everyone is like them) and where congregations are significantly different to, or travel in from outside, the local community.

- **Like with like – potential benefits of shared experience.** Churches might benefit from being connected to others with whom they have more in common and/or can share experience. This obviously relates to the most deprived urban areas, but could also be of benefit for those with more mixed populations – for example, Charlbury volunteered to share their experience of developing a community food-sharing initiative with other similar rural towns/villages.

- **Connecting across difference.** Some respondents reflected that their wider deanery connections were a source of strength, precisely because of variation across the deanery. There were other positive examples of 'richer' churches deliberately seeking to support those in 'poorer' areas, either through formal joint working or through individual relationships. One respondent suggested setting up such partnership links as a potential source of support via the diocese. In other areas (e.g. Chipping Norton and surrounding villages), a church might lead an initiative predominantly serving their parish, but also serving those in neighbouring parishes – with the neighbouring parishes supporting that initiative rather than duplicating the effort.

COVID-19: Ongoing challenge and complexity

Summary

Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic varied significantly across the diocese, and the economic profile of the local area and social make-up of the community were mentioned as particularly significant variables. Many participants felt it was difficult to judge the impact of COVID-19 because the full effects had yet to be realised, were diffuse, or hidden. Opinions varied as to whether the pandemic had been a 'leveller' in terms of its socio-economic impact or whether it had a disproportionate impact on the poorest. Greatest concern focused around social and emotional impact – particularly isolation, disconnection, mental health, and financial stress. Wider reflections identified some positive effects, including increased community spirit, but overall recognised a considerable, and sometimes overwhelming, need for support.

Across the diocese, church responses to the pandemic were immense but very varied, spanning a range of social action – from maintaining presence and connection, and offering pastoral care or practical support, through to specific financial needs-based projects. A minority of churches reported that they had not felt able to respond to the pandemic, either at all or not as they would have liked, because of limited capacity, an inward-looking culture and/or the wider impact of enforced closure of buildings. Responses were also shown to be shaped by attitudes to, and capacity for, risk and/or change and innovation.

In summary, church responses to the Covid crisis could be said to be shaped by their pre-existing posture – models of church and mission, pre-existing programmes and links with community, wider networks with other churches and community groups. However, they were not necessarily determined by them. The extent and resilience of networks and relationships across the community, and attitudes to collaborative working, also played a significant part.

Key findings about the impact of COVID-19

"This crisis has demonstrated how well people look out for their neighbours, how positive people manage to stay, how grateful they are that they live in an area where they can walk in the countryside. But there are underlying anxieties as time goes on."

1. No 'common experience' across the diocese – underlining the significance of local context

Survey responses indicated a considerable variety of views regarding the impact of COVID-19 (Figure 1). Commonality was greatest regarding 'increased community spirit', 'isolation and loneliness' and, to a slightly lesser extent, 'mental health and anxiety', with no/low numbers saying 'none at all'.[4] Responses in the other answer categories were much more varied.

It would be interesting to compare perceptions to local area statistics, and to review further how the variation in responses correlates with varying rates of Covid infection and deaths in different areas and/or to socio-economic context. Early indications suggest:

- Perceived impact on businesses, jobs and livelihoods very much depended on the economic profile of the local area, with retail, leisure and tourism particularly badly hit:

  "The local community (retail, leisure) has been very badly hit indeed. Most are closed. Livelihoods have been badly affected. And those on the margins of society have nowhere to go."

Source: 149 responses to online survey.
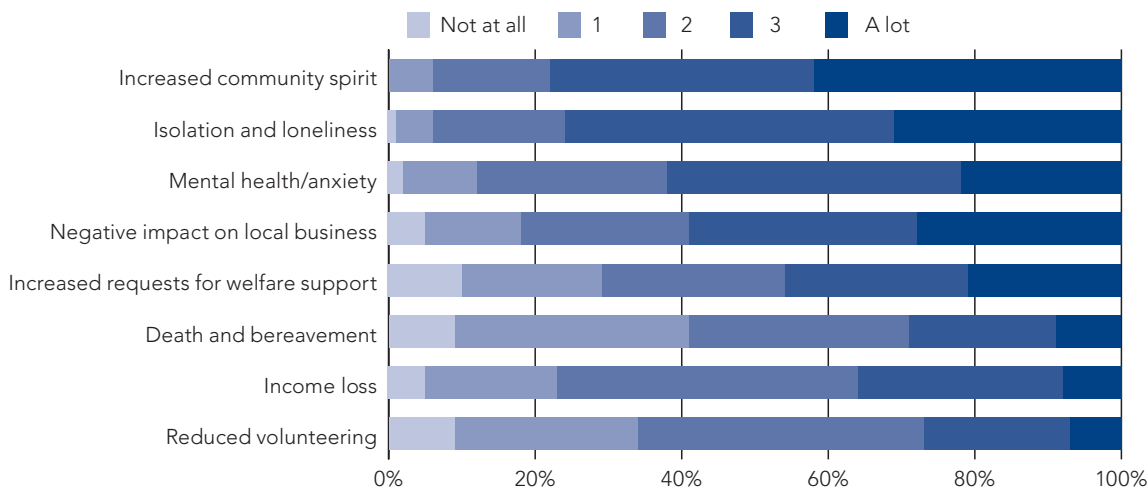
"Massive impact on self-employed or business owners unable to work or serve customers from home."

However, other respondents also referred to growth of local businesses or food shops.

- Experiences also varied significantly according to the social and ethnic make-up of the community:

"Numbers of infections/deaths are high in Slough, due in part to multi-generational families and overcrowding. Large swathes of poverty, closure of shops, high street getting less attractive, lack of support for teenagers and young people."

"The cultural impact of funerals. Caribbean communities can no longer have community send offs, [or] Nine Nights. Some denominations can't worship in a cultural way, as singing and raised voices are banned. They can't even read the Bible aloud and pray aloud together."

- Others mentioned increasing crime rate and a rise in rough sleeping.

2. Too early and/or difficult to say

Many participants commented that they felt it was difficult to fully judge the impacts of COVID-19:

- Some felt the full impact was not seen yet ("tip of the iceberg") or felt their perception was anecdotal, rather than evidenced:

"… still too early to judge the overall impact of this year. And it is difficult to see the overall pattern because each story feels particular and personal."

"The longer this continues, the greater will be the impacts."

"I think the impacts will be more long-term when the continued cost has to be repaid."

- A small minority attributed their lack of knowledge to a lack of contact with the local community – either because they lived outside the area, had lost contact because of the closure of church buildings/services, or because they didn't feel able to engage with the community.

- Others felt that many community members either found it hard to admit they were struggling or were reluctant to ask for help.

> **"The longer this continues, the greater will be the impacts."**

This view reflects the timing of conversations (December 2020 and January–February 2021), but also the complexity of the crisis and subsequent policy responses. Not only is the picture continually developing, but it is unlikely that blanket or simple judgements are possible.[5] In addition, it looks likely that the huge economic support from Government has succeeded in insuring families' and firms' incomes against income shock and subsequent recession.[6]

3. 'Leveller' or disproportionate impact on the poorest.

Views regarding the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 varied. Some felt job loss and insecurity was affecting the more affluent, often perhaps for the

first time. Others pointed to a rapidly increasing gap between rich and poor, including marked educational inequality.

"Some 20% of the population do not have internet access at all. Some 10% have internet access at a very basic level but do not have the necessary smart phones with the latest features, so cannot reach things like WhatsApp."

Concern was expressed about the combination of inequality and isolation being particularly socially divisive:

"The pandemic affects people very differently. These differences are amplified by our isolation from one another, having less opportunity to discuss together."

Again, this reflects the wider national picture, in which protection of average household incomes may mask differentials in experience. There were concerns about those falling out of work and onto benefits (with a typical fall in income of 40%) or affected by gaps in government support. Self-employed people were not all eligible for grants, recipients of so called 'legacy benefits' did not receive the £20 per week uplift made available to Universal Credit claimants and those on low incomes were either not eligible for, or only qualified for very low, Statutory Sick Pay.[7] At the same time, compared to higher income households, low income households were more likely to have increased their spending during the pandemic.[8]

4. Where respondents felt able to say, concerns predominantly focused around social and emotional impacts

- Social isolation, disconnection and loneliness (especially over winter lockdown).
- Mental health and wider wellbeing, with specific concerns for teachers; the elderly and those shielding or living alone; young adults and children; and families, especially those feeling time or financial pressure.
- Financial stress and subsequent increased strains on relationships, including domestic violence.

"Significant increase in food poverty, and more families struggling to make ends meet."

"Significant increase in food poverty, and more families struggling to make ends meet. Several relationships have broken down. Some describe insomnia, fear,

anxiety, loss of motivation, confidence. Many seem to neglect their self-care and describe irrational emotions and extremes of behaviour. Single mothers are struggling to manage children's behaviour at home and the pressures of online schooling, some children are suffering from anxiety and depression."

Some respondents went deeper, exploring wider ramifications of the pandemic, including powerlessness and the inability to plan, distress over other people's perceived selfishness, and increased social disconnection and fear of others – with a sense that these would have lasting impacts well beyond the lifting of lockdown: "We are fighting against hopelessness".

"I think this is a real time of shock waves. And, at the moment, most of it is kind of sublimated and buried, like the beginnings of a tsunami. And the wave is yet to hit the beach. And I think what we are going to see in the next 18 months to two years is that actually there's going to be a huge ongoing impact. And we probably don't know quite what that's going to be or how it's going to manifest itself."

"People are just getting on with their lives and becoming less aware of others around them."
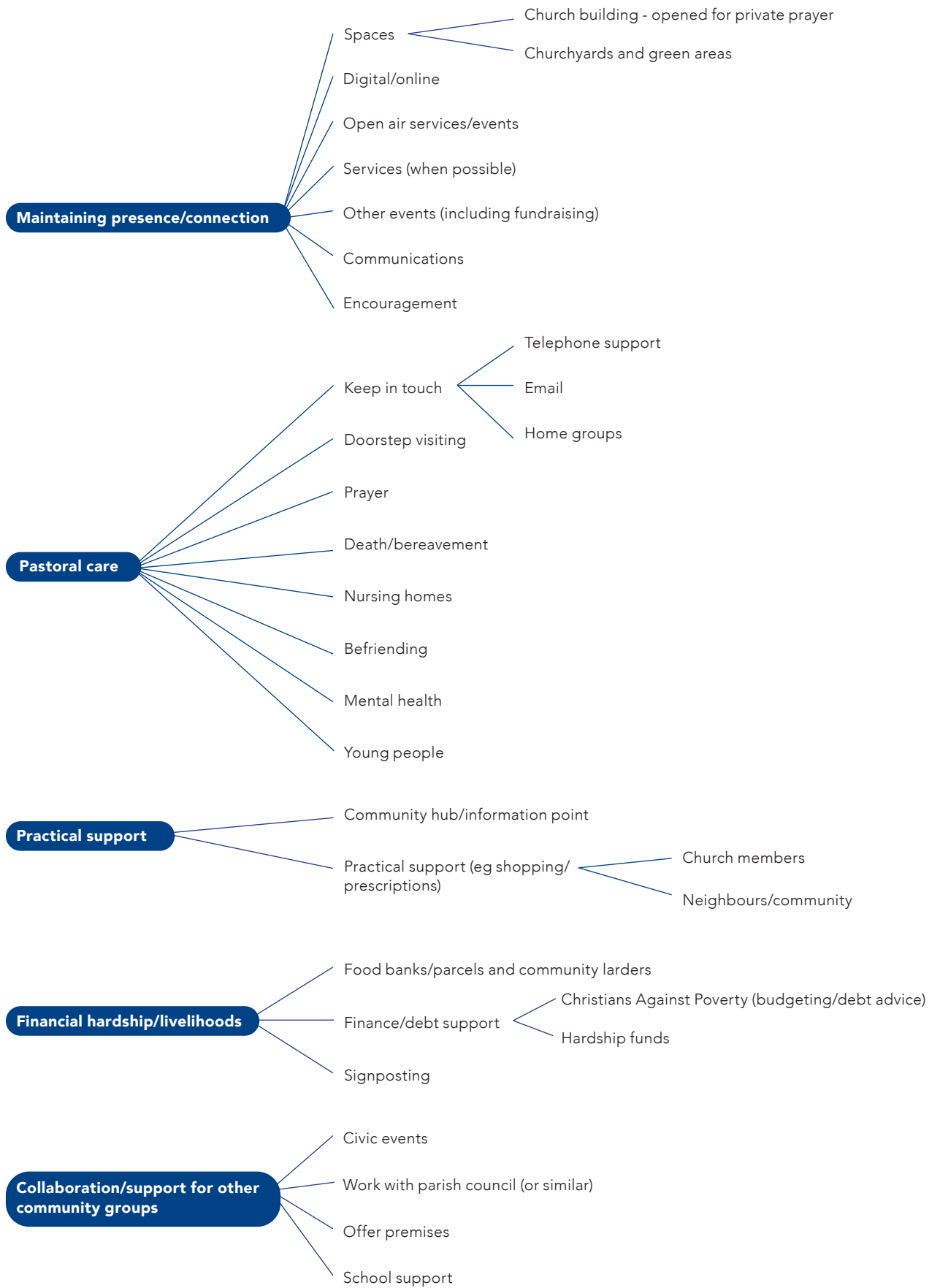
5. Some "silver linings" but also "overwhelming need for support"

Many respondents did identify some positive aspects emerging from the pandemic, including increased "community spirit" and "looking out" for one another – shopping for the isolated and keeping in telephone contact; generosity with money and practical support; good uptake of online worship and other opportunities to connect; those previously outside of church accessing online services or reaching out to church for help; increased partnership – working with parish councils, charities and local businesses. But most responses indicated concern regarding the impact on members of the community and on the community itself:

"The community is not a community, at the moment. Church is closed, so even that small opportunity to get together is not there. People are just getting on with their own lives and becoming less and less aware of others around them."

In some cases, at least, there were clear indications of an "overwhelming need for support".

Figure 2: Five areas of church response to COVID-19

Maintaining presence/connection
- Spaces
  - Church building - opened for private prayer
  - Churchyards and green areas
- Digital/online
- Open air services/events
- Services (when possible)
- Other events (including fundraising)
- Communications
- Encouragement

Pastoral care
- Keep in touch
  - Telephone support
  - Email
  - Home groups
- Doorstep visiting
- Prayer
- Death/bereavement
- Nursing homes
- Befriending
- Mental health
- Young people

Practical support
- Community hub/information point
- Practical support (eg shopping/prescriptions)
  - Church members
  - Neighbours/community

Financial hardship/livelihoods
- Food banks/parcels and community larders
- Finance/debt support
  - Christians Against Poverty (budgeting/debt advice)
  - Hardship funds
- Signposting

Collaboration/support for other community groups
- Civic events
- Work with parish council (or similar)
- Offer premises
- School support

Thanks to a grant from the development fund, a local church is able to distribute surplus food.

Key findings around church responses to COVID-19

1. Church responses to COVID-19 were immense and very varied

Churches responded to the pandemic in a staggering variety of ways (see Figure 2). Their responses were reported via the online survey and in-depth conversations. They span a range of social action responses – from maintaining presence and connection through to specific needs-based projects. (This range of social action responses was also identified (pre-pandemic) in the Church Urban Fund/Theos Growing Good report.[9])

The nature of our survey and conversations mean it isn't possible to statistically quantify how many churches were able to respond and how. However, indications are that the majority of churches were able to offer some sort of response, with a significant number seeing a step-up or significant change in their social engagement. For some churches, their Covid response was an extension of pre-pandemic initiatives, adapting very swiftly to the new environment. But for others, the pandemic acted as impetus for completely new levels or forms of engagement in their community.

Participation in relatively wide-scale provision of practical support (shopping, collecting prescriptions, etc) could perhaps be seen as a new feature of the pandemic – for society, not just churches. However, several churches pointed to the basis of that practical care in pre-existing pastoral care relationships, suggesting that by their very nature, some ecclesiastical communities were well placed to offer practical support. Some churches were predominantly focused on caring for existing members of their own church community but, encouragingly, many churches had positive engagement and collaboration with wider community hubs (see 'Collaborations, networks and relationships' below).

For some, although not all, physical church spaces formed an important part of their response, whether opening buildings for private prayer, or external green spaces as places for reflection, prayer, and relaxation:

"I just think that the physicality of church buildings is really important. Because for lots of people God lives in that building. God sometimes goes on holiday with them, but God doesn't go to the other church down the road, right? And God might not go online either… So our grounds are really important, because I know it's about place – that people feel close to God when they can sit in that space. And even if the building's not open, the fact that they can see the church…"

2. Constraints to church response

A significant minority of churches reported that they had not felt able to respond to the pandemic, either at all or not as well as they would have liked. This was variously attributed to limited capacity (because of elderly congregations; lack of finances; over-reliance on clergy who themselves felt overstretched or too consumed by church concerns to be able to focus on the wider community); an inward-looking or parochial attitude among congregations; and the wider impact of building closure and/or not being able to gather people together. Others felt constrained by the limitations of their buildings, expressing renewed hope that building renovation could open the way to renewed engagement with community.

Several in-depth conversations movingly explored the tensions inherent in wishing to continue serving their

communities but not feeling able to do so because of concerns over Covid-related infection risks. Others appeared to have taken an alternative stance, feeling that the nature of the crisis required a response from the Church and that they were inspired (even liberated) to explore what could be done, within the limits of what they considered safe. This, to a certain extent, reflected individual leaders' and teams' attitudes to, and immediate capacity for, risk and/or change and

innovation – with some thriving at the challenge, and others feeling more overwhelmed. Once again there is significance in context. Although difficult to say for certain, it did appear that churches facing greater challenges (because of levels of deprivation and/ or Covid rates in their area) and/or those with more depleted leadership teams, were often more wary and less able to respond in ways they would have liked (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Survey response – Felt unable to respond to COVID-19 or identified significant challenges that inhibited a response
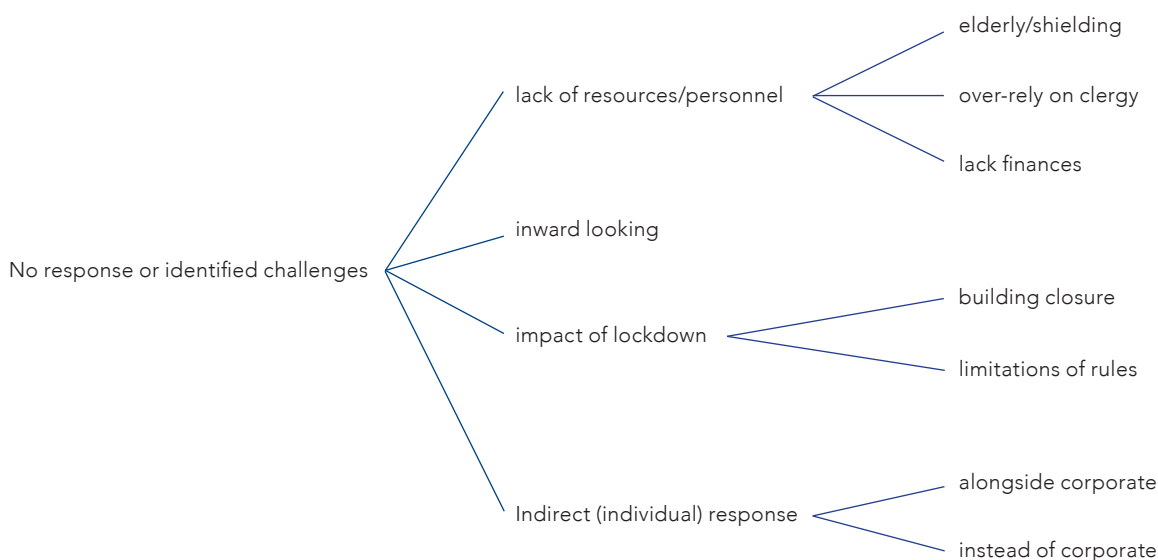
Although church responses to the Covid crisis may have been shaped by their pre-existing posture, they were not necessarily determined by them. There were impressive examples of new initiatives emerging in churches for whom this level of community engagement was a distinctly new venture. The range of responses, and in particular the fact that some churches with previous high levels of engagement with their community did not feel able to respond, indicate that some churches (and clergy) may need more support in a crisis.

3. Collaborations, networks and relationships across the community were key – but hard

The value of local networking and relationships was a strong theme in the in-depth conversations, with several respondents telling compelling stories of how pre-existing relationships had enabled or shaped their COVID-19 response: "Good foundations had already been laid for that collaboration, but the need increased and became more visible".

Of 149 survey responses – around half (70) reported that the pandemic had prompted an increase in collaborative working between their church and other churches or community groups. The main drivers for this appeared to be:

- Mutual support and encouragement, sharing resources and being able to do more with others – "together we are stronger", "maximising breadth and depth of our offering" – even where this meant overlooking previous differences - "Feels like the pandemic has focused many people on urgency of need, and on shared identity rather than different ecclesiology."

- Avoiding duplication – "we identified what was in place first and joined in rather than reinventing the wheel", including mirroring or learning from others.

- Easier to meet virtually – e.g. local church leaders switching from monthly to weekly get-togethers, or forming online ecumenical prayer group "allowed

opportunity for inter-church communication, which made up for the loss of other interactions".

- Increased volunteering – local community having more time to help, or were inspired to help, others who were in need.

- Local hubs, local parish councils and other statutory bodies having to work collaboratively "has strengthened communication and trust".

During in-depth conversations, some participants sounded a note of caution regarding collaboration, highlighting the challenge of maintaining connections if not able to meet over an extended period, and of strains to relationships through fatigue and/or remote working.

For those who reported reduction in collaborative working, the explanations reflected the earlier pattern of those who had not felt able to respond:

- Overwhelmed by increased workload – "Reeling from the increased task list"; "Too much to do with own community"; "We're all trying to keep our own shows on the road".

- Parochial attitude of church/congregation – "I feel that each church is looking after their own congregations first"; "A spirit of insularity and fear".

- Physically unable to meet – collaboration reduced because other churches closed or were unable to join together/respond: "We have worked very closely with other churches on community outreach events (in the past), which could not take place in current circumstances"; "Everything in the village seems to have stopped".

- Leadership issues, interregnum or other clergy capacity issues – "It feels like whilst the church community is active here, the lack of clergy presence has meant the opportunity has been missed".

- Lack of technical expertise (IT) – made it difficult to engage/keep in touch.

4. The value of de-centred, 'serving rather than leading', approaches

Many participants reflected a common experience, of expectation from the community that the local church would be stepping up its pastoral and practical support. Strikingly, in several compelling cases, churches recognised that they had a lot to offer (buildings, resources, IT, personnel, paid and volunteer staff, and administrative expertise) but consciously adopted a role in which they were not (or not always) the lead partner:

"We were not often the key organiser, but we have been able to be effective partners through our communication network and our team of volunteers, and through lending out our buildings."

While there were examples of churches taking the initiative in establishing community support projects, more often churches were able to work effectively in a supporting role to local, civic 'community hubs'.

"I hope that [COVID-19] will have strengthened localism – people certainly shop at small local outlets far more. There will be a hunger for community events and hopefully the church will join in rather than simply do their own thing."

For further discussion

What are the best ways to provide support across varied experience, especially in a crisis? How, together, do we identify those church areas where life (generally or in a crisis) will be hardest? How do we move to support and protect those likely to be most vulnerable because of high deprivation, demographic characteristics or local employment profile?

Is there a distinctively Christian response to issues of isolation and loneliness, disconnection and/ or emotional and mental wellbeing? How can we all support churches to engage thoughtfully and effectively in these issues? And how do we avoid duplication or reinventing the wheel when so many are working on this?

How can we best learn from, and share, good practice from those churches who continued or expanded community engagement over the pandemic?

How can we identify those churches that may need more support with resources/capacity, wider vision, navigating restrictions/limitations, alternative leadership models, technical expertise – and how can we come together to meet that need? Centrally? Through connections/networking?

How can we support the 'de-centring' of church social engagement, theologically/missiologically and practically? How does a 'de-centred' role fit with wider church growth or development strategies?

During the first lockdown, a street poster advertising agency used its resources to spread a message of hope.

Hopes and fears for the future

Summary

Asking about hopes and fears for the next 12-18 months elicited responses that ranged from cautious optimism to genuine fear and pessimism, sometimes even from the same person. Often this was based on uncertainty – simply not knowing how things would work out. Genuine fears regarding long-term social and economic impact on communities were balanced with tentative hope that, in some places at least, church and community might be becoming better able to respond. However, some expressed particular concern that the church may struggle to keep up with rapid pace of change in their communities.

Many expressed concerns about disconnection with local community and church. While there were hopes for reconnection, there was also fear that lost links and contacts, lost habits and changing worship patterns, might have a long-term detrimental effect on church communities and the church's ability to engage. For those who felt positive about their community engagement, there was hope that they would both continue "capitalising on connections" and the opportunities presented by the challenge to rebuild, but also some concerns about returning to 'business as usual' without learning lessons from the pandemic.

Finally, while there were stories of churches experiencing God's abundant provision in supporting community work, the balance of responses leant strongly towards genuine fears about resourcing – in terms of money and people. Some identified a potentially vicious downward spiral, with high demands and reduced participation leading to greater insularity and further financial decline. For others, the opportunity to rethink was not seen as necessarily negative, while still recognising the challenge this presented in terms of managing transitions. Some did express concern, however, that key strategic decisions would have to be made (by church and civic authorities) but that they feared they, or their communities, would be side-lined in that process.

Key findings

Perhaps unsurprisingly, asking respondents about their hopes and fears for the next 12-18 months elicited many varied responses – a selection of these from survey and interview participants are presented here, preserving their own words for authenticity.

1. Optimism to pessimism, sometimes in the same person or comment – particularly grounded in a sense that it was difficult to know how things will work out

"I would hope that we would become kinder to each other, but am not sure if this will happen – and we may revert to normal again very soon."

2. Genuine fears regarding long-term social and economic impact on communities – "increasing poverty gap leading to swathes of disadvantaged, disaffected and forgotten people" – were balanced with tentative hopes that, in some places at least,

church and community might be becoming better able to respond

"The town centre is going to be very different, with so many small (and large) shops/businesses making staff redundant/shutting altogether, many people are anxious about the future of their jobs, money issues etc."

"Economic hardship, the sustainability of local businesses, the economic sustainability of the church, increased mental health problems, the effect on public sector employees, family breakdown. I could go on! My hope is that the Church can reach out in tenderness and love to those in need, working in partnership with others, and that church will be seen as central to community."

"Fear that the pandemic may have an adverse effect on communities analogous to the long Covid aftermath

for some individuals. Hope that this year's collaborative working will ensure working together of statutory, voluntary and faith groups remain strong, and fear that we will return to 'normal' quickly and ignore the hidden additional poverty and inequality."

3. Others were concerned that the church may struggle to keep pace with changing community – the decline in town centres and changing social/community life as well as the growth and change brought about by new housing development

- Rapid change, because of the pandemic and/or new housing, was seen by some as an opportunity, but by others with more trepidation:

"I am worried the church will be seen as irrelevant… the community pre-Covid was changing rapidly. There's a huge amount of building going on in terms of housing. This virus may be the end of a viable high street; major chains are moving out which means there is little to come into town for. We may have sections of town that become 'dormitories', as people move here to be close to transport and spend much of their life away from [here]."

> **"Irreparable damage done to sense of community. Church as a bonding agent moved to the margin."**

"The complete loss of high street shops, banks and cafés will result in fewer and fewer people in the town centre. Isolation and little contact between diverse communities. The church becoming irrelevant without imaginative services and engagements – initially online, but eventually face to face."

"Irreparable damage done to sense of community. Church as a bonding agent moved even more to the margin."

"With the building of another 64 houses and Covid still killing villagers, it will be necessary to continue/start again with our outreach, when permitted."

"[This] is a place people want to move out of. Some of the most committed church goers end up leaving. Fearful about the more resilient volunteers leaving. Loss of energy. Fear."

4. Disconnection with local community and church – and challenges for reconnection

- There was concern about lost connections between church and community, as a result of prolonged closure of buildings and groups, particularly with those on the 'fringe' of church. Some felt this could make it difficult to know the needs of the community:

"My concern is for the people who were going to lunchtime drop-in on a Thursday, lunch on a Friday, and Saturday breakfast with us… The church will get on with being the church, it will just carry on, you know, doing what it does? But then there are the other people, the young families. Who's going to share the message of Jesus with young families?… There was a lot of discussion about whether we were going to do the outside Christingle or not, and lots of people were getting very worried about it: "No, I think it's too unsafe", "We can't do this". And it's like: "Who is this for?" – It's the people who come to Christingle. It's our biggest service every year, the church is absolutely bombed. This is not for the church people and they're not going to find it online. This is for the people who live in our community. This is the one time that [they] come to talk to God."

"I think there will be an emotional and psychological legacy from the stress and lockdown of this year. At a time when it was needed most, the church family and comfort of services were not there."

"Fear for young people and families – mainly under-eight-year-olds. At this most formative stage of their lives, they are being deprived of active, fun engagement with the church community, and the multi-generational contact with people of faith that they need, in order to see faith as a living and loving reality rather than just a set of beliefs or Bible stories."

"My anxiety is really all about the building of relationships coming out of the pandemic. We've had a long gap, in which very fragile threads of connection – that we've built up with individuals, families, sections of community in various fields – have kind of just blown away, gently. And it's about when we emerge and pick up again as a church, in our kind of normal routine, normal Sunday services, you know, normal activities throughout the year. [Are] all those threads of connection going to still be there? Or halfway, because of this enforced closedown? Have we lost those connections? And how on earth are we going to build those up again?"

- There was concern about lost habits – that many may not return to church and/or have a fear of meeting in person again:

"My fear is that our congregation will not return to church in person, as they are too elderly and fearful. Leading to the failure of our church."

Katherine Crowsley, a lay Pioneer and church planter in Milton Keynes, started a forest church for her community.

"I hope that the lack of in-church services during the pandemic will lead to increased congregations when services return. I fear the opposite, as less-dedicated worshippers may have 'lost the habit' of even occasional attendance."

"Changing patterns of worship behaviour may leave parish churches effectively redundant."

- There were comments about what potential there could be to capitalise on increased engagement online:

"Would be great if all those taking part in online services would continue their journeys with Christ!"

"When the pandemic is over, some of our people will have to [be] coaxed out of their homes and back into church. The Zoom service has been so successful!"

"Fear that active worshipping community will be reduced compared to before. Internet 'church' is falling away after initial novelty, and in any event encourages a 'take-away' approach to church engagement, rather than genuine community – much less active discipleship."

5. Hopes for continued and increasing community engagement, and new opportunities to rebuild, together with some concerns about returning to 'business as usual' without learning lessons

- Building on connections built during the pandemic:

"Building on now much greater trust between community and the church, benefit of increased volunteering and community spirit."

"That the partnership the church enjoys with the community will continue to be strengthened and the church continues to play an important role in this community."

- New opportunities:

Engaging with green spaces/Forest Church

"New interests, sparked in lockdown, will generate new groups and societies."

"To get into more lives – parenting, marriage, financial wisdom."

"[Climate change and ecological crisis] could be our next pandemic… that's something that we're all going to focus on. And it's something we need to work on together as a community. We can't just expect the government or someone else to fix it. And where there are similar models of enabling a community to come together to work out solutions for that community, then providing space to share can be a solution – to economic, poverty and social justice issues. And, actually, there are a whole wealth of environmental issues where what's needed is that place where people can come together to solve the problems."

Volunteers prepare an Alpha Course meal at St Mary's, Twyford.

- Failing to learn lessons "Regular church folk will want to go back to normal and we become a silo again."

6. Resourcing – fear and faith, opportunity and challenge

Some stories, particularly arising from in-depth conversations, spoke powerfully about a sense of abundance – with the resources needed for social engagement and outreach being found from within and beyond the community. However, for many, fears about resourcing – in terms of money and people – were very real. One simply answered the 'hopes/fears' question with "Decline in church, on all fronts", another with a one-word response: "survival".

> **"It will take all our energies to get back on track, never mind moving forward."**

Fears predominantly concerned the financial viability of churches: "Monetary generosity, for a building used on high days and holidays, cannot be sustained without the cultural change required to make the building more of a cultural hub", and also about human resources: "fear of fatigue for volunteers coming in waves".

Several respondents identified this as a potentially vicious circle:

"The financial impact of the pandemic may become increasingly difficult – it will take all our energies to get clubs, halls, churches and community organisations back on track, never mind moving forward."

"Fear that return to worship will not happen and hope that the church will be sufficiently resourced by volunteers to reopen for community events. Income is very much reduced, as essential fundraising activities have had to cease."

"We become more inward looking and focus on the church as a club rather than bringing the Good News to [the place] as a whole – despite the difficulty of reaching a wealthy community. We fail to engage with projects inviting participation outside of the parish (e.g. a mental health cafe, toddlers and mums, refugees, etc)."

"I feel that whilst the church community is active, unless the clergy make a change and there is a change to the parish share arrangement, ours and many other churches are not sustainable in the longer term. The Church of England, it feels, has shut up shop or at least battened down, instead of reaching out."

Although not necessarily an unduly negative thing – and possibly even an opportunity – "In a weird way, you know, the slate has been wiped clean and we can start afresh."

"The fear is finances, when money is tight amongst families, there is no disposable income for the church.

This has made us look to ourselves and reassess what we have been doing. I also hope that we can reach out as a church and help others to come to love God."

"In terms of how this has made us refocus our priorities of mission, in a way it's been a blessing to the Church that we now have to rethink. Who are we as Church and who do we want to be? And after all those years rattling around in the PCC waiting to pass things through, we now have a blank slate, we can do whatever we want, because no one's in the church building. So, we can ship things in… not what we want, but actually what we feel God is leading us to do. And, actually, I think that's a real, fresh opportunity that we haven't had for the last 30 years; we get a reboot, which I'm personally excited about, or have been excited about."

But managing transitions presents a challenge:

"Knowing how to manage people's perceptions of what is possible, together with their expectations. Also knowing how to deal with people's reactions to church needing to change."

"To convert the goodwill and trust gained from the community/church partnership into more interest in our Gospel message. Some church members may be more inward-looking as we fight to remain viable after all reserves are used up, but hopefully they will see the need to bring newcomers as Kingdom work and not just to spread the financial burden."

"That the church wakes up and has a proper presence in as many parishes as possible, with money spent on clergy in parishes, not expensive schemes and bureaucracy."

7. Acceptance that key strategic decisions (church and civic) will have to be made – but fear of being side-lined

"These are [local redevelopment] plans for the future, we know. But we've lost links and contacts, and we need to find ways of rebuilding these things. We are afraid that the council will make decisions that side-line local communities: they need to provide schools and healthcare facilities. There are some educational inequality proposals, but these decisions are being made about the community, by the council, without consultation."

For further discussion

- How can churches support each other/be supported to deal with uncertainty and change? Especially where that relates to increased inequality and deepened social division. Can we build on insight that churches can be key place of connection within communities, if they build that role?

- How can we share stories of church engagement that inspire confidence in the future?

- How can we ensure that strategic decisions are seen to be encompassing issues of deprivation and inequality?

- How can churches feel empowered to participate in managing change and in local decision making (community organising)?

The Parish Planning Tool helps local churches to see where God is already at work and how they can join in.

Receiving support from the diocese

Summary

Across all the responses, the key themes regarding church engagement with community, especially around issues of poverty and inequality, were around knowing how to engage (awareness, skills and experience) and feeling able to engage (capacity and confidence).

Key findings about support needs

When asked, in the in-depth conversations, what support they would like to receive from the diocese, this was not clear cut or easy to answer for most participants. While some had strong views, others developed their ideas as they spoke or said that they would need to give this further thought.

The survey question was framed slightly differently, with respondents presented with four pre-determined answers, plus an 'other' option. Asked in this way, the trend of responses was towards personnel/capacity and money/finances – although, for both these answers, around a third of respondents did not say they were looking for these things.

The in-depth conversations offered an opportunity to unpack and understand more about what respondents felt was important about the sort of support the diocese might provide, and why. These, perhaps more considered, responses tended more towards a broader range of support, with more emphasis on access to training/expertise and support with collaboration/partnerships. In particular:

1. Listen and tell stories

A key area, mentioned in several in-depth conversations but not included in the survey answers, was the important role the diocese could play in listening to and sharing stories – of what life was like in different parts of the diocese and of how the church was (and could) respond. Sharing stories was felt to be encouraging, could help to spread good practice, and promote networking and mutual support.

"What the diocese can do is to enable people to tell the stories of what might be possible in a local area, and to share that expertise, so that other people can both be inspired and learn from other people's learning."

Figure 4: Categories of support most needed from the diocese, as selected by participants

Category	%
Personnel/capacity	67.1%
Money/finances	61%
Support with partnering with others	44.5%
Access to training/expertise	41.1%
Other	4.8%
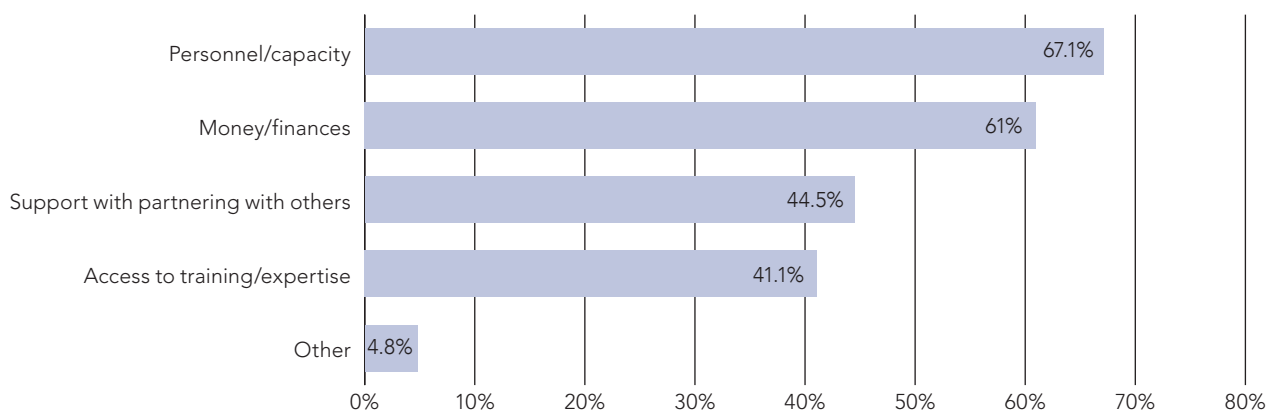
2. Inclusion in strategic decision-making – but avoid overwhelming

A second area, that some respondents felt strongly about, was support from the diocese in terms of inclusion in decision making, rather than feeling 'done to'. Many of the issues raised about church, individual, and clergy ability to engage with and serve their communities were difficult and sensitive – this was felt to be an area in which the diocese could give support (by providing safe, supporting environments to share and tackle issues) and avoid hindering:

"The most important thing for us is an opportunity to talk about these problems in a safe way and also not to have lots of stuff we have to engage with passed down to us – it's overwhelming."

> "Help people to tell stories of what might be possible in one area, and share that expertise."

3. Importance of teamworking, alongside support with personnel and capacity

67% of survey respondents identified support with 'personnel/capacity'. However, effective teamwork was also emphasised by in-depth participants as being essential to community engagement. This applied equally to those who had strong teams and those who identified the dangers of clergy attempting to work alone.

Several respondents, significantly particularly those working in more deprived areas, reflected on the challenges of building teams. Local context was seen to play a significant role, with concerns expressed about the extent to which it was realistic to rely too heavily on those who themselves were significantly aging, had challenging life circumstances or little formal education.

In more than one case, this was portrayed as a significant block to ministry and even the future viability of the church. Those respondents felt strongly that diocesan support, in terms of filling vacancies and making use of training placements, had the potential to make a big difference. There was also reflection about the need to build wider lay engagement (in church life and in social outreach), presented as 'both/and' rather than 'instead of' investment in paid/clergy positions.

4. Money/finance (61%)

Many of the 'hopes' expressed by respondents revolved around particular projects or intentions to invest in their buildings to adapt them for better community engagement. These were projects for which they had been able to secure grants and/or other such opportunities.

Several in-depth interview-respondents reflected a realism about financial support – and lack of money was not (openly at least) at the top of anyone's lists of barriers to community engagement.

5. Support for partnerships (45%)

Knowing where/how to start with community engagement was seen as key by many – both those who had recently managed to initiate successful projects and those who had indicated they would like to do more.

Building networks – Several participants reflected on the importance of wider networks, with other churches (Church of England and ecumenical) and civic/statutory bodies, but also of the time needed to invest in these, sometimes with uncertain rewards.

In a church context, beneficial networks could include connecting with those with similar context and concerns or with those in quite different circumstances (see p.10).

Many of those running successful projects suggested that they would be willing to share stories and experience with others, with some indicating that they had already identified the sharing of expertise and enabling of others as a next stage for their project.

6. Access to training/expertise (41%)

For those who mentioned specific training needs, these predominantly focused on mental health and helping individuals deal with unemployment. Others recognised that other organisations, for example the Christians Against Poverty debt and budgeting advice service, could offer expertise and skills that they themselves did not have.

Fundraising also gained a specific mention – with an admission both that wider fundraising might be essential to expanding community projects and that this was a specific skill and knowledge set (that not everyone has).

Community engagement/planning (see 'Support for partnerships', above) – but again, there was recognition by some that project planning and management were specific skills that they would require.

7. Other (5%)

"Learning to value human beings over wealth."

"Willingness to utilise [clergy?] training opportunities."

"We have just appointed a new rector, due to start in March. With the existing clergy, and hopefully a house for duty appointment for our empty clergy house, we look forward to the future."

"Reduce parish share, rather than having to justify new initiatives to gain a grant/rebate. We are already flat out to stand still."

For further discussion

The responses above give a clear steer as to the support needed from the diocese on these issues – in particular, a sense that sharing positive stories is important for encouragement, connection and sharing expertise, and of the importance of networking, connection, and partnership skills.

The question is how to respond effectively and with integrity.

Learnings for mission

Summary

The varied conversations conducted for this project included a huge depth and range of reflection and opportunities for learning about what it means to do mission with a focus on poverty and inequality. Across the diocese there is clearly a wealth of expertise and experience on this. Conversations touched on a broad range of topics, in different ways. What follows presents a summary of key reflections, each of which could provide the basis for a further, fuller, practical theological reflection in the future.

Key findings about mission

1. Compassion and justice

For some, the theological motivation to engage with and serve their communities was a very clearly expressed, single mandate (i.e. an Isaiah 65 vision for church and community). Others alluded to a much broader range of theological imperatives. Many referred, in different ways, to a notion of the 'common good' – wider than individual church interests and encompassing wellbeing for the whole community. This often involved locating a desire to respond to immediate need (feeding the hungry, etc) within a bigger picture of the Kingdom of God:

> **"I think God is not finished with the church here, yet."**

"Our strapline is: 'Called to be a community of mercy and kindness'. That is our baseline, that we work to. Interestingly, there were some people when we were developing that who said: 'Well, it doesn't mention Jesus'. And, actually, the pushback from others was that we want it to be as wide and as broad as possible, and it will encompass Jesus, of course. Christ's love will encompass all. But also, it stretches beyond things that might put people off, whereas they can understand mercy and kindness. And I think, for me, [our response to COVID-19] has been one of those examples where we've seen that kind of living out of what it says on the tin."

For some, service was an essential precursor to wider evangelism: through loving in practice, you earn the right to share the gospel of Christ. Others placed more emphasis on 'no strings attached' service:

"The hopes are that we might have made some contacts that we can build on and draw on. But I think our theological stance would be… kind of in the words of the prayer: 'To give and not to count the cost'. We're not wanting a payback from it, we're wanting to offer a blessing, having been blessed by God and with the gift of grace. And if that leads others to ask questions and want to come and join us, then that would be terrific. But there's no expectation of that."

Extending notions of compassion and justice, several conversations touched on a desire to transition from perceived gains of COVID-19 (community spirit, working together, etc) towards being able to work with community on wider themes of justice and care – in tackling environmental issues and climate change.

2. Presence and engagement

The theme of 'presence and engagement' – borrowed from the language and experience of interfaith practice but applied to issues of community and deprivation more broadly – came through strongly. Sometimes it was explicitly addressed, sometimes referenced more obliquely:

"For me, the church's primary mission, if I may use the language of interfaith, is to be present and engaged. So that you're not coming in as a 'hit, hit, run', but more the Celtic mission, where you love and care for the whole of society, whoever they are, in a non-prejudicial way. And you support or back all actions of loving kindness. And what that does is build trust. They know you're not there to get scalps, you're there to love them.

"And, of course, what happens then is they ask you to be engaged, to lead prayers too. And then people come, and they feel safe, and then they want to come again and be part of the church community without, if you like, being a baptised member. So, we have a

Maintaining a sense of responsibility for a community makes a big difference.

number of Muslim leaders that say about the town centre church: 'This is my church'. They're not saying they're Christians, they [are] saying: 'I feel I belong here. I am accepted here. And this is the place I want to express civic and [other] matters of justice and fairness'."

- Cure of souls – A sense of responsibility for place, and those who live and worked there, was a strong motivation for some clergy. Importantly, this was interpreted not only as care for individuals, but for the wider community and its civic life. Several clergy were able to tell clear stories of how, despite massive changes to the role and place of the church, there were still examples showing how maintaining a sense of responsibility for a community – a strong sense of presence within it, socially and physically – and developing a civic role, was still able to make a big difference.

- Visible and known – Key precursors to a civic and/or community presence:

  – Individuals – The significance of individual people, mostly but not always clergy, in being a relational presence in communities: "The ongoing presence,

pastoral care and ministry of the parish clergy should not be underestimated."

– Church community/projects:
"We have got the ugliest building in a pretty ugly estate. And how things look and how we're perceived has been an area that we've worked a lot on. We've got some horrible big doors. So, for example, on a Sunday morning, we are welcoming by standing outside the church. And we try to welcome people and engage with people, whether they're coming to church or not – everybody that walks by with their dog gets a friendly 'Hello'. And we make sure that we know all of our neighbours…

> **"We don't want to be seen as trying to do something to you."**

"Welcome, I think, for estate churches and in areas of deprivation, is so, so important. Because what we don't want to be seen as, is just another agency who are trying to do something to you, instead of a church that wants to do things with you…

"…Welcome is so much more than how you hand out the books. It's a huge, huge thing to undertake and to change and to examine yourself on. Yeah, all those little signals that we give off as churches, you have to really drill down into them and see how you're perceived."

– Building/space – The significance of places/ buildings in themselves, but also as spaces for connection and becoming a focal point for gathering community to respond:

"We can work with areas of poverty and suffering across divides."

"Even with having to close the church building, which is this really difficult decision we made last week… we've now started putting stuff up in the churchyard, prayer stations that people can stop at. And it's forced us to get out of the building, in all sorts of ways. I think this is really encouraging. And as we do that, we become more aware of the inequalities. And we can work with areas of poverty and suffering across the party-political divides, the cultural divides, the race divides. And that can only be a fantastic thing. So, I see the whole thing is a very mixed experience: of sadness, but [also] of re-formation."

- Connected and networked – within and across the wider community.

  – Importance of welcome – for example, see quote regarding 'church/community projects' on previous page.

  – Being willing to invest in relationships – although this was also perceived to have become much more challenging during the pandemic, with some relationships maintained via Zoom, but not always to the same quality or breadth.

  – Trust and integrity – including an ability to bring together different partners, through creating neutral or safe space.

  "[Local councillors] said: 'We couldn't do this [town-wide food response] without you', which is [a] really interesting statement. They weren't talking about my gifts and skills; they were talking about the role of the church in the community."

3. Changing role for church: "It's a fascinating season in which we live"

While some participants questioned whether narratives of decline told the whole story – either because they maintained it needed to be placed within the context of declining participation across wider social life (e.g. political parties, community groups, etc) or because they found alternative narratives within their own experience and ministry – nearly all had some cause to reflect on the changing nature of church in society and the implications this had for how they engaged with community. Where successful engagement had flourished, there appeared to be some common characteristics:

- Pre-existing presence and engagement, which could be translated into a renewed role, often at the invitation of others outside of the church

- Prepared to work with others, not necessarily to take the lead (e.g. community organising)

- Prepared to relinquish power, to enter into partnerships where "the church has influence, but no power":

Interviewer: "The role you're describing for the church, in terms of encouraging and supporting things that are happening rather than being the kind of driving force or the lead partner in there, how does that feel either for you as clergy, or for the church?"

"It's a fascinating season in which we live."

"In a strange way, it feels wrong. And in a strange way, it feels completely right. It feels wrong, because the church has naturally led in these initiatives and has naturally been the place where people come if they're in trouble… It's been the first time that I've experienced quite such a stark side-lining of the church, if you see what I mean. And this is why it's not necessarily a bad thing, actually: [because] it's wonderful to see the resilience of this community. And it's wonderful that the church can affirm that, that I can say: 'You know, you don't need this matriarchal, patriarchal organisation to tell you what to do; you can stand on your own two feet and have resources within you. God given resources, I would argue."

- Prepared to reimagine the role of the parish church – developing networks, teams or 'hub' working while, almost paradoxically, also maintaining the crucial importance of a very real, local, geographical presence. In other words a 'both/and' combination rather than an 'either/or' dichotomy.

4. Collaboration – with other churches and those outside the Church

Many conversations touched, in some way, on how collaboration was perceived as the only way forward for churches, especially in the new environment. This involved varying sorts of collaboration:

- Working as a team – within churches (e.g., staff teams, laity and clergy sharing roles) and between teams of churches (within the Church of England and ecumenically). This was seen as key to resourcing issues, as well as to freeing up the maximum capacity of all to serve in mission. Although several participants, notably all from the more deprived areas, commented on the challenges of building and maintaining a team in communities already facing multiple challenges, particularly ageing communities (especially within church congregations) and those with low educational skills or low professional expertise.

- Networking – In many areas, civic/secular, interfaith, inter-church networks played a key role in the pandemic response and, although often challenging, both commitment to networking and the networks themselves were generally perceived to have been strengthened by the pandemic.

> **"We need to work more in partnership with others and should be a leading force behind this."**

- Partnerships – Several participants referred to no longer attempting to 'go it alone' in setting up or leading a new project:

  "My hopes are for building a greater sense of community, with the church becoming a comforting and practical presence and centre in the midst of recovery. We need to work more in partnership with others and should be a leading force behind this."

  Often this involved 'decentring' – being prepared to set aside agendas, control and even power, to work with others with integrity.

- Willing to offer gifts – including buildings/spaces, people and expertise, in areas such as volunteer recruitment/management and safeguarding – to service of others:

  "It's a fantastic gift churches can offer, that initiatives like X [a community project supported by the church], do fall within safeguarding – so you can get all your DBS checks sorted out, and your safeguarding training done, through the

diocese. And they do fall within the insurance, so Ecclesiastical Insurance will cover this because it is a church initiative, and that is such a gift."

> **"Working with other local groups we have helped to establish a food distribution network."**

5. Challenges to demonstrating 'impact'

Across the conversations, there was a sense that emphasis on compassion and justice, along with collaboration, required a shift in focus beyond church attendance numbers – requiring instead a conceptualisation of the purpose of activity, and of accounting for 'impact' within that purpose. The challenges identified included:

- Timescales:

  "The whole community organising thing is that you are in it for the long haul… You're not just in it for 'we could get what we want' by piggybacking onto this particular campaign, but: 'we will support this campaign with our neighbours'. And then, when there's something that we feel passionate about that also resonates with them, they will join with us to get that win. So, it's long – it might be three years down the line when that thing that for you is really important bubbles to the surface. And then you're asking them for their support and help. Which is also a challenge, isn't it?

  "When it comes to reporting success, it is all about value for money on immediate impact, isn't it? But it might be quite difficult to tell. It might be on something that wasn't under your control. And it might be a very long time away."

- Financial sustainability might not be achievable in some areas:

  "Churches in areas of deprivation, whether that is urban or rural or whatever…. if the deal breaker is: 'You haven't got a plan for keeping this going financially, beyond like six or seven years', then I have to kind of hold my hands up and say: 'No, I don't. I've told you all I know…. either we're going to have to go elsewhere (for funding) or you're going to have to help us go out.' There's a real question about whether it is only those churches that can commit to [financial sustainability] and are secure enough financially to be able to get that result [that can secure funding]. I'm not denying or dismissing that question about financial sustainability, I'm just saying: 'How does the diocese envisage getting results for churches that are situated in places where there's less?"

- Some churches/communities might face additional challenges, beyond financial, to achieving demonstrable impact – i.e. taking longer to work effectively with a transient population, people facing multiple challenges and/or low education or aspiration.

At the extreme, perhaps, some even went as far as expressing a real reluctance to engage in language of 'mission', because of the perceived link to numbers-based growth:

"I think we think of it not as 'mission', but as part of living out our Christian calling. So, and this is where we may be different to others, we are not doing this with an aim of conversion or evangelising or anything like that. We are simply living out who we believe we are called to be as the community of Christians. We're not 'making disciples', we are all just being Christian, I think. Feeding the hungry, clothing the poor. Absolutely… it does enable people to say, 'Oh, gosh, oh, so there is a point to church' …but we never went into it imagining that we would increase footfall [into church services]."

6. Abundance versus scarcity: "using what you do have and using it well"

As explored under 'Hopes and fears' (page 19), there was a tension across conversations (and survey responses) between those who wanted to stress the inherent scarcity of their situation, in terms of finance, people and other assets, and others who emphasised an experience of God's abundance, even in the face of financial difficulty. To a certain extent this was attributable to different circumstances and events, but also to disposition. One respondent suggested the potential value of the process of Appreciative Inquiry (e.g. in the diocesan 'Parish Planning Tool') – starting from what's strong, not what's wrong:

"I really think Appreciative Inquiry is very helpful, for estate churches in particular, because you get that opportunity to ask some critical questions about what's around you and what you've got. Because what you've got and what you haven't got is more acute, you can't just go out and spend two grand on something that you haven't got, because you don't have it. So, using what you do have and using it well, I think that's probably one of the most important things… it counters at least some of the narrative that comes from estate churches – one of lack… a sense of being left behind… Well, no, we have to actually start with what we have got. And we have to celebrate that."

For further discussion

- Recognition of the need to celebrate needs-based action undertaken by churches, but also underline the need to campaign for systemic change (compassion and justice).

- The main forms of support requested by people who have contributed to this report are: help with knowing how to engage (awareness, skills and experience), and feeling better able to engage (capacity and confidence).

- Potential for further exploration of 'presence and engagement' as a frame for community engagement, learning from interfaith experience.

- Acceptance that achieving and demonstrating impact in local social action and wider social justice work can be challenging – requiring sensitive discernment and often long timescales.

- Underlining the potential significance of 'bottom-up', local, theological reflection on mission, learning from and through praxis.

- Reminder of the importance of hearing directly from those, both individuals and churches, with lived experience of poverty and marginalisation.

- The diocese's commitment to Appreciative Inquiry may suggest that our approach to community organising might be complemented by further exploration of asset-based community development approaches.

Conclusions

The imperative for Christian communities to engage in social action and social justice lies at the heart of our faith – it is in our Scriptures, our history, and in our deep longing to see the Kingdom come. It is an endeavour to which all of us in the Diocese of Oxford continue to commit ourselves.

The findings set out in this report will help to shape the priorities of the steering group. It's clear that engagement is best when people know how to engage (awareness, skills and experience) and feel able to engage (capacity and confidence). Four work streams support that endeavour:

Inform

There was a clearly expressed desire for better access to stories and expertise. There are great examples of effective action amongst our churches that can inspire the work of others who are exploring how best to engage with their contexts.

Similarly, the external partners within the steering group were able to point to rich sources of information within their organisations, which they would be pleased to share. There is a task to gather and curate these stories and resources in a way that is easily accessible and which inspires and informs local churches. There is also work to be done to help churches better understand shifting patterns of need where current understanding is less strong and where connections have weakened.

Enable

In addition to shifting patterns of need, we note changes in the way churches engage with various types of need. We see emerging initiatives that were not church-led to the extent that might have happened in the past, either out of necessity or choice. This de-centred approach calls for new skills and processes.

There is an opportunity to develop systemic training resources that increase the skill and confidence of people to engage more broadly and more effectively with today's needs. In addition, an obvious quick win is to provide short, accessible 'how to' videos to help people take the next step in their journey of engagement. The leaders of existing initiatives have expressed their willingness to advise and mentor others who are at an earlier stage of engagement. We will look to find ways to make better connections that enable delivery-focused learning across the diocese.

Promote

The parish system gives us an excellent opportunity to understand and respond to local needs. As a large diocese, in a national church, we also have the opportunity to work with each other to better effect, to leverage our efforts, and attend to issues beyond the local that have national focus. To do both of these things well, we need to develop a campaign programme that provides parishes with clear options and guidance about seasonal priorities and emerging calls-to-action.

Connect

The aims of the inform-, enable-, and promote workstreams depend on making better connections, and this is true at a technical level and a relational level. We're looking at ways to provide a one-stop place online where the learning and initiatives that arise from this report can be found and continually refreshed and developed.

> **Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1.17).**

There is also a task to better connect people with common interests in communities of practice which help grow our capacity for mitigation and advocacy with people experiencing poverty and inequality.

Appendix

Research methodology

We undertook 30 in-depth conversations with leaders from churches across the diocese. We prioritised areas of high deprivation (according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation and child and pensioner poverty) and these churches demonstrated a wide range of characteristics. Conversations were conducted by Jane Perry (independent researcher) and Liz Jackson (Assistant Archdeacon for Berkshire).

Conversations were guided by a broad topic guide, which focused on church leaders' perceptions of the challenges emerging from the Covid crisis, church responses, their hopes and fears for the future, and what support from the diocese might be helpful for them in order to face those challenges with confidence.

It is worth noting that the consultation was planned during the autumn of 2020, when COVID-19 rates were declining, but that conversations were carried out between December 2020 and February 2021, during what turned out to be the peak of the second wave of infections.

While a statistically representative survey was beyond the scope of resources, the consultation was designed, as far as possible, to cover a breadth of experience across the diocese. The rich, in-depth qualitative information from the extended conversations was complemented by a short survey of five to six questions, which was made widely available via diocesan eNews. This survey elicited 149 responses, further informing our understanding and generating a list of contacts/projects that can be included in future work.

Community engagement

Defining community engagement

In keeping with the Cabinet Office and recent Church Urban Fund (CUF)/Theos Gra:ce project, this study concerns 'social action': "people coming together to help improve their lives and solve problems that are important in their communities"[10] or more specifically 'congregational social action': "the collective activity of congregations to establish means of support or effect social change in ways consistent with Christian social witness".[11]

However, this report favours the term **social (or community) engagement**, placing emphasis on outward-looking, receptive interaction with the wider community as a potentially two-way process – in which the church congregation not only looks to flow outwards into the community with acts of charity, service and proclamation, but is also open to receive the gifts of that community, working together for the growth of God's Kingdom.[12]

Our use of the term 'social/community engagement' builds on earlier Theos/CUF work describing congregational social action as **relational** – orientated towards the building of communities and rich interpersonal relationships, not (solely) towards provision of services; **incarnational** – emphasising being part of a community, rather than part of a client/provider relationship; and **spiritual** – galvanised by collective and individual religious commitment (with the theology or narrative behind that action sometimes, and sometimes not, clearly articulated).

Church social action or community engagement is often used synonymously with 'social justice', but that conflation of the two terms risks missing a crucial distinction between work that seeks to respond to or ameliorate the immediate consequences of poverty and inequality (sometimes referred to as 'pulling people out of the water') and that which goes 'upstream' and attempts to understand and prevent them from being pushed in (tackling 'systemic injustice').[13]

Areas of community engagement

By design, this project sought to encompass the full range of potential faith community engagement with issues of poverty and inequality (Figure 5) – practical, pastoral, prophetic, political, and partnership – undertaken by individuals, congregations, and more formal organisations, while recognising that the potential scope of this work was huge and, inevitably, some selectivity might be required.

Figure 5: Matrix of Faith Community Engagement

	Personal/Individual	**Congregational/ Collective including interfaith and ecumenical**	**Organisational faith-based third sector organisations – local, national, international**
Practical: meeting needs/ community provision	• Volunteering in foodbanks, night shelters, etc. • Direct support to those who are hungry or homeless	• Night shelters • Covid community support groups • Independent food projects • Soup runs • Lunch clubs • Acts 435	• Salvation Army • YMCA • Local housing associations
Pastoral: emotional and psychological support	• Prayer and conversation with those who are struggling • Support for family and friends (face to face, social networking)	• Community cafés • Pastoral Care teams engaged in contexts of debt, hunger, homelessness • Worship and social contexts for mutual support • Provision of safe contexts for advice and counselling	• Green Pastures • CAP debt counselling • Befriending and buddying schemes, (e.g. Archway & Ami, Oxford)
Prophetic: challenging society and cultural norms	• Publishing – reports and blogs, social media, arts • Individual campaigning (e.g. Lenten fasting to end food poverty)	• Poverty hearings • Anti-poverty pilgrimages • Church membership of peace and justice networks addressing poverty issues	• Organisations that raise awareness of poverty issues: • Church Action on Poverty • Church Urban Fund • Caritas • Joint Public Issues team
Political: party political, cross-party, and issue-based lobbying	• Christian local councillors • Individual engagement with tenants' rights, unions, real living wage etc) • Individual MPs/Lords with an explicit faith	• Election hustings to highlight local poverty and inequality issues with all parties • Raising issues with local politicians and lobbying for change • Community organising	• Christian Socialist Movement • Christian Conservatives • Christian Greens, etc.
Partnership: working in alliances in secular context	• Individuals campaigning through other organisations e.g. CPAG, Oxfam UK	• Churches open to community organisations • CAB/benefits support • Health Service • Family mediation • School engagement • Credit Union membership	• Anti-poverty alliances, e.g. End Hunger UK, anti-austerity campaigns

Endnotes

1 Torsten Bell and Mike Brewer, *The 12-Month Stretch. Where the Government has delivered – and where it has failed – during the Covid-19 crisis*, March 2021, p.17, resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-12-month-stretch/

2 Jessamin Birdsall, Bryony Loveless and Tom Sefton, *Church in Action 2020/21: A Survey of Churches' Community Responses to the Pandemic (CUF)*, cuf.org.uk/news/church-in-action accessed 30 April 2021

3 Jane Perry, *For Richer, For Poorer: poverty and livelihoods in the Diocese of Oxford Diocese of Oxford, 2017*. This report includes nationally published local area statistics regarding demographic, social and economic characteristics of communities across the diocese. (More recent updates to local area statistics are available, but we are confident that local changes do not, at this stage, make a material difference to our understanding.)

4 No responses for 'community spirit', 1 for 'isolation' and 2 for 'mental health'.

5 Torsten Bell and Mike Brewer, *The 12-Month Stretch. Where the Government has delivered – and where it has failed – during the Covid-19 crisis*, March 2021, p.3, resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-12-month-stretch/

6 *Ibid*, pp.4-5. Extensions of support in Budget 2021 have taken crisis-related Government spending to £340bn, of which £186bn relates specifically to support for households (via furlough, higher benefits or grants for the self-employed) or firms (including grants). That amounts to around £6,700 per household in the UK – with the result that the worst recession for 300 years has seen the smallest rise in unemployment of any recession in living memory, with household income broadly similar in 2020 to its 2019 level in aggregate, despite GDP falling by almost 10%.

7 *Ibid*, p.7.

8 *Ibid*, p.13.

9 Hannah Rich, *Growing Good; Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England*, theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2000/01/31/the-grace-project

10 'Social Action', GOV.UK, gov.uk/government/publications/centre-for-social-action/centre-for-social-action accessed 27 July 2021.

11 Hannah Rich, *Growing Good; Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England*, p.37, theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2000/01/31/the-grace-project accessed 15 April 2021.

12 See Al Barrett and Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In* (London: SCM Press, 2020), chapter 12

13 Quote attributed to Desmond Tutu: "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."

Acknowledgements

Further reading and information

National reports

Torsten Bell and Mike Brewer, *The 12-Month Stretch. Where the Government has delivered – and where it has failed – during the Covid-19 crisis*, March 2021, p. 17, resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-12-month-stretch resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-12-month-stretch/ [accessed 2 September 2021]

Jessamin Birdsall, Bryony Loveless and Tom Sefton, *Church in Action 2020/21: A Survey of Churches' Community Responses to the Pandemic (CUF)*, cuf.org.uk/news/church-in-action [accessed 30 April 2021]

Hannah Rich, *Growing Good; Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England*, theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2000/01/31/the-grace-project [accessed 15 April 2021]

Diocesan reports

Jo Ind, *Exploring Christian Responses to Loneliness in the Thames Valley*, oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/OD701-loneliness-book.pdf [accessed 2 September 2021]

Jane Perry, *For Richer, For Poorer: poverty and livelihoods in the Diocese of Oxford*, oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/For-richer-for-poorer-2017.pdf [accessed 2 September 2021]

Neighbourhood statistics

Central Church of England Research and Statistics Department parish maps (in ArcGIS) – Census and national statistics, aggregated to parish boundaries, arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html [accessed 2 September 2021].

The Children's Society's A New Deal for Children In… reports – localised data from a combination of official and public sources, and The Children's Society's own research collating some of the key issues impacting children's lives, data.childrenssociety.org.uk/ [accessed 20 October 2021].

Church Urban Fund Look-Up tool – limited set of measures, aggregated to parish boundaries, cuf.org.uk/lookup-tool [accessed 2 September 2021].

For Richer, For Poorer: Poverty and livelihoods in the Diocese of Oxford (in ArcGIS) – more accessible/user friendly access to neighbourhood data, as well as aggregated to parish, arcgis.com/apps/View/index.html?appid=c37a2b4dac904704b8b19a6f8bc6513f [accessed 20 October 2021].

Legend:
- Oxford
- Buckinghamshire
- Berkshire
- Dorchester
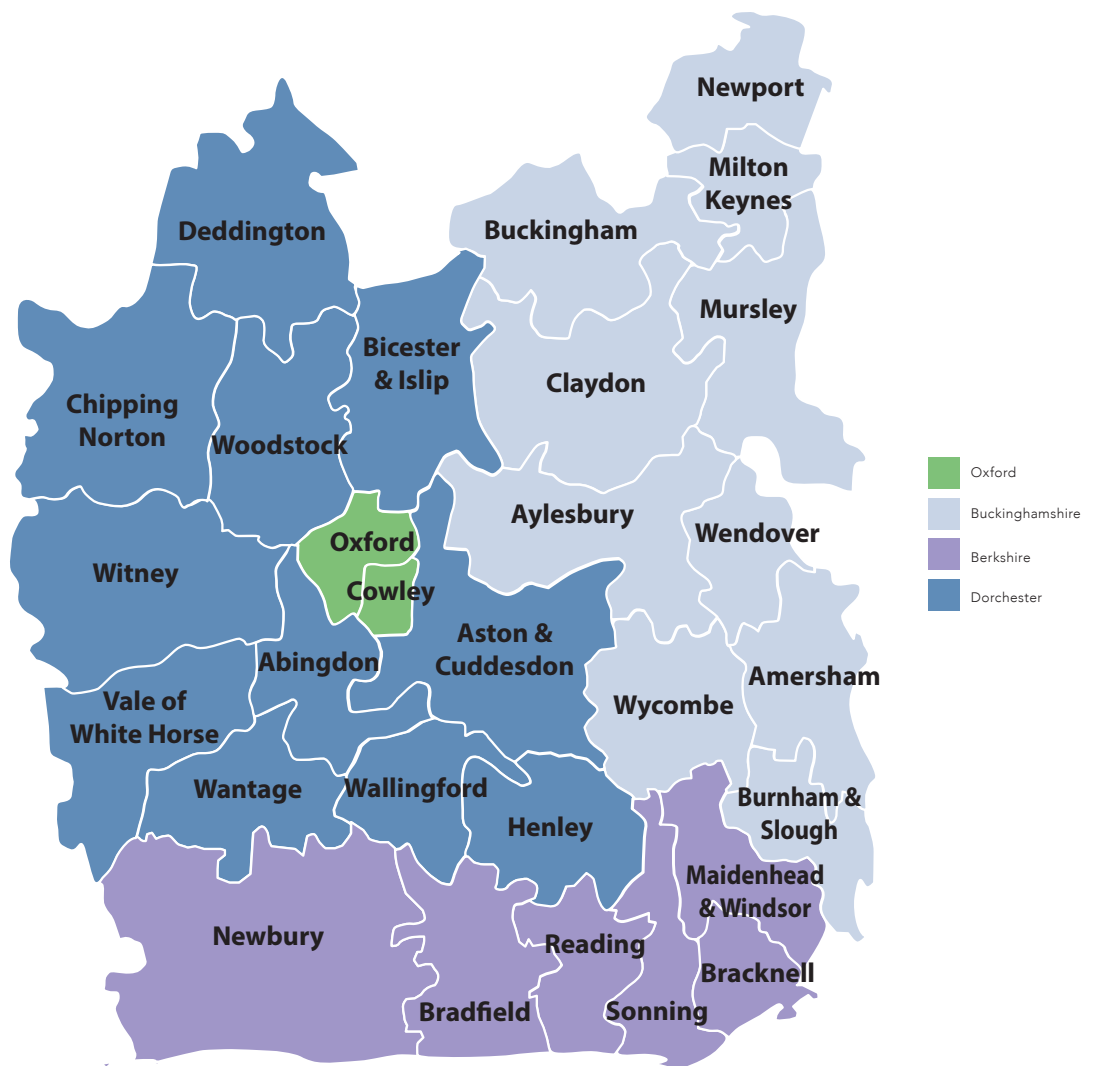
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Together, we work with God and with others for the common good in every place in one of the great crossroads of the world.

oxford.anglican.org/poverty-and-inequality