

# VOICES

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## FROM EXPERIENCE

## Faith communities contributing to LSP priorities

**One in a series of studies illustrating the contribution that community development can make to community empowerment**

This research is set within the policy context of recognition of the value and contribution made by faith groups to the social capital of the country and encourages greater involvement of local people and communities in decision-making.

The Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) has launched '**Face to Face and Side by Side**', a consultation on how government can support faith groups' engagement with their local communities.

The Local Government White Papers and the Third Sector Review have emphasised the importance of local government engaging with faith communities. The research found that a wide range of activities was taking place across a number of faiths and denominations which contributes to all the themes of the Local Strategic Partnership and to the different levels of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking.

- A Strong Economy - faith groups operate or support social and community enterprises
- Successful Neighbourhoods - faith groups provide a wide range of facilities and activities to make a neighbourhood a better place to live.
- Inclusive, Healthy Communities - provision for physical activity and sport and support given to older people are common. Many groups working with vulnerable groups in the fields of drug and alcohol, learning disability, mental health, homelessness, bereavement and parenting are supported. Office or meeting space for voluntary and statutory organisations is provided.
- A Great Place to Grow Up - a wide range of provision for children and young people is directly delivered and premises available for Homestart and Surestart groups amongst many other groups.
- Social capital: bonding capital - Faith groups have an important role in providing people with a 'spiritual home' and a base for putting their values into action.
- Social Capital: bridging capital – links were made within the faith itself, with other faiths, with national and international organisations and with secular bodies.
- Social Capital: linking capital - enables people to exert influence and reach outside normal circles

Faith organisations can respond quickly, flexibly and imaginatively to expressions of local need; they can empower individuals and groups to try new ways of doing things and challenge existing structures to develop alternative ways of addressing needs and emerging issues. This vast amount of activity by faith groups, which responds to local needs, uses local resources of people and buildings and brings in other resources.

## **SHEFFIELD FAITHS FORUM Audit of Faith Related Community Activity**

This research aimed to build on the anecdotal evidence and information of examples of involvement by faith groups in community activity, to demonstrate the faith sector's contribution to the city.

The research aimed to:

- assess the potential for faith groups to have an impact on community cohesion and regeneration
- raise awareness of the contribution of faith communities among partners and stakeholders
- provide the rationale for faith communities involvement in decision making.

Information was collected through 82 survey forms returned from contacts on the Faiths Forum database; web searches to identify active faith groups, face-to-face interviews with ten organisations to gather in depth information. The information was analysed in relation to the four themes of the Local Strategic Partnership

- Strong economy
- Successful neighbourhoods
- Inclusive, healthy communities
- Great place to grow up

A distinction made by Baker and Skinner between spiritual capital and religious capital is helpful. Spiritual capital provides a value base and moral vision for action seen in individual and group activity. Religious capital is the practical contribution to local and national life made by faith groups. This survey focused on religious capital, including physical capital, as many faith groups have buildings used by communities.

## **A Strong Economy**

Faith groups operate or support social and community enterprises, act as collection points for a Credit Union, run charity shops, make training provision and provide conference facilities. There are a number of high profile examples across the city - St Mary's at Bramall Lane, the Mega Centre, the Terminus Initiative and the New Roots shop and café at the Burngreave Ashram.

30% of respondent groups were involved in activities that contributed towards a strong economy  
12% had premises housing activities contributing to this theme.

## **Successful Neighbourhoods.**

Faith groups provide a wide range of facilities and activities that make a neighbourhood a better place to live. Hosting coffee mornings, lunch clubs, arts and musical events, cafés and other social gatherings. Others welcome asylum seekers and refugees to women's conversation clubs, English classes, offer food parcels and space for worship for groups without their own buildings. The physical capital held by faith groups is used by local decision making forums, community safety groups and Neighbourhood Watch groups.

62% carried out activities which contributed towards the neighbourhood being a better place to live.  
46% had their premises used for activities that contributed towards a successful neighbourhood.

## **Inclusive, Healthy Communities.**

Two significant areas of provision are the opportunities for physical activity and sport and the support given to older people. Groups providing advice and counselling, drug and alcohol user support, provision for learning disabled people, supporting mental health services users, food and clothing for homeless people, bereavement groups and parenting support are supported. Many offer office or meeting space for voluntary and statutory organisations with a health remit.

80% were involved in activities that promoted inclusive, healthy communities.  
44% had their premises used by organisations working towards inclusive, healthy communities.

## **A Great Place to Grow Up.**

Provision for children and young people ranges from simple parent and toddler groups to a Lottery funded Family Development Project. Youth clubs, pre-schools, homework clubs, holiday clubs and uniformed youth groups are all supported. Premises are used by Homestart and Surestart groups, dance classes, martial arts groups and children's parties.

52% provided services and facilities for children and young people.  
30% had their buildings used for activities concerned with children and young people.

## **Social capital: bonding capital.**

Bonding capital is based upon enduring multi faceted relationships between people with shared beliefs and values. Faith groups have an important role in providing people with a 'spiritual home' and a base for putting their values into action.

## **Social Capital: bridging capital.**

Bridging capital is where groups or individuals work together and form bridges between themselves and others. This can be links within the faith itself, with other faiths, with national and international organisations and with a wide range of secular organisations; from the Race Equality council and OFFER to community forums, advice centres, healthy living projects, community and youth associations, older persons' networks, youth forums, asylum seekers' groups, parish councils and carnival communities. It is clear that faith groups make a significant contribution to local community action.

## **Social Capital: linking capital.**

Linking capital enables people to exact influence and reach outside normal circles. A church sharing space with refugee worshipping communities; the faith inspired movement supporting a range of faith and secular groups to reach out to asylum seekers and refugees; a diocese inspired and managed project to support churches and community groups to be involved with regeneration.

The research revealed the sheer amount of activity that is taking place in faith related organisations, inspired by people's faiths and values. There is evidence of activity among a diverse range of groups not only for the benefit of their members but also for both the wider community in the local neighbourhoods, across the city and for people coming as strangers to the city.

**Whilst** the social capital impacts are largely unquantified and unquantifiable the activities are clearly having far reaching effects as they touch many people's lives.

It should also be borne in mind though that there are issues which may prevent faith communities from fulfilling their potential as sources and generators of social capital.

Internal obstacles identified in a recent JRF report may include attitudes towards including women and young people and the limited capacity some groups have in terms of energy, confidence and time commitment.

External obstacles include the lack of support from government bodies for the work they do. It is also important to recognise that Compliance with government agendas may serve to undermine energy and distinctiveness of faith related networks and enterprise.

We should also be careful that there are a number of different definitions of social capital – it is not an uncontested concept. The CLG definition was used here because their consultation '**Face to Face, Side by Side**' was launched during the process of the work and it was important to gather information that could be fed into that process.

**A community development approach** ensured that deliberate attempts were made to involve all faiths across the spectrum. The survey was informed by the contribution made by all faiths to addressing social justice issues, human rights and meeting people's needs.

This study has been written and compiled by members of the Yorkshire and Humber Community Development Network, based on research commissioned by Sheffield Faiths Forum. For further information about the network contact Val Harris on [valharris@phoncoop.coop](mailto:valharris@phoncoop.coop)

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