

Building Better Neighbourhoods: The Contribution of Faith Communities to Oxfordshire Life

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from a programme of research into the contribution of worshipping communities in Oxfordshire to the task of **Building Better Neighbourhoods**. Commissioned by Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Alliance (OSCA) the research involved two phases of activity. **First**, a questionnaire survey designed to capture the characteristics of Oxfordshire's worshipping communities; the scale and scope of their contribution to building better neighbourhoods; the principal beneficiaries of their work; the resources that they bring to the task; the partnerships that they're involved with; and their assessment of the value of their activities. **Second**, face-to-face interviews were used to document stories about the roles and impact of faith groups in Oxfordshire on the development of better neighbourhoods.

Headline findings

Oxfordshire has as many as 450 worshipping communities of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and other traditions. **These communities are diverse, reflecting differences within as well as between religions, in history, culture, ethnicity, theology and contemporary context.** This complexity must be recognised if a full contribution to building better neighbourhoods is to be achieved.

The 192 worshipping communities that participated in the questionnaire survey make a substantial contribution to the task of building better neighbourhoods in Oxfordshire. The survey revealed that many of these faith communities have common concerns and are already working together on joint activity. Of particular note is the scale and scope of provision for children and young people. But, further work is needed to fulfil the aspirations of many faith groups to contribute more towards community integration and well-being.

Worshipping communities responding to the Building Better Neighbourhoods survey are less than half of the worshipping communities of Oxfordshire. Even so they:

- **invest over £8.5 million each year in paying staff**
- **give 150,000 volunteering hours each year,** excluding that devoted to maintaining the internal life of the worshipping community. Multiplying this investment of time by the current minimum wage reveals that this volunteering is worth over £70,000 each month, or approximately £850,000 a year
- **make over 220 rooms and halls available for use by the wider community.** Of the 200,000 hours available each year **80,000 hours are already used by other organisations**
- Contribute in the order of £1.7 million to the tourist economy of the County each year

Faith-based social enterprises make an important contribution to meeting local needs including, for example, homelessness through a well established drop-in centre, problems of debt through a successful credit union and anti-social behaviour through a growing Street Pastors initiative.

In addition, visits to faith buildings and spaces contribute significantly to **tourism** and the management of churchyards provide valuable resources for the promotion of **green strategies**.

Survey respondents make the judgement that their members make an even greater contribution to building better neighbourhoods through their everyday lives, work and associations than through activity formally organised by the church, mosque, temple or synagogue.

Public sector agencies and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations display a willingness to work alongside worshipping communities, although they recognise the mutual barriers that can sometimes exist and that need to be overcome.

Worshipping communities make a considerable contribution to current policy development and implementation aimed at building better neighbourhoods, in particular through:

- **the volunteering** that they stimulate
- welfare projects and **social enterprises** that they establish
- their contribution to **building bridges** between people of different backgrounds

Detailed research findings

In conducting the Building Better Neighbourhoods survey responses were invited from the full spectrum of worshipping communities present in the County, including Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, United Reformed, Baptist, Orthodox and Black Majority Churches, as well as from Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and other faith communities. However, because of the relatively small populations of worshipping communities involved, **in reporting findings it has been necessary to aggregate responses from Christian denominations other than Church of England and from other faiths in order that the anonymity of individual communities is maintained.**

Of the 192 responses to the Building Better Neighbourhoods survey, the majority, 72%, came from Church of England communities, with 21% from other Christian denominations and seven per cent from other faiths. Over 13,000 people of all ages regularly attend the main worship meetings, one third of whom are under 30 years old. In terms of the distance travelled by members of responding communities in order to attend worship, data show that for bulk of Church of England respondents (85%), the majority of worshippers travel less than two miles to attend Church services. This picture of relatively concentrated, localised worshipping communities is not repeated for responses from other Christian denominations nor from other faiths.

- **Who benefits from worshipping community activities?** The number of independent or semi-independent organisations established by worshipping communities in Oxfordshire is considerable. The types of issues being addressed undoubtedly contribute to the politically driven agenda of recent years which has placed increased emphasis on the role of the voluntary sector in helping to support delivery of welfare to those in the greatest disadvantage. Of particular note is the number of worshipping communities which have established independent projects to support the needs of children, young people and families or have established centres to support the needs of all in their local communities. Beyond these core areas of concern, evidence collected through the

Building Better Neighbourhoods survey suggests that worshipping communities in Oxfordshire are also helping to address other high profile needs in their local areas. These include responding to homelessness through a well established drop-in centre, the effects of being in debt through a successful credit union, and anti-social behaviour, through a growing Street Pastors scheme.

- **What resources do they bring?** Worshipping communities in Oxfordshire dedicate an array of physical, emotional and spiritual resources to the task of building better neighbourhoods, including paid staff, volunteers, buildings and time. Types of paid worker employed include those concerned with meeting the spiritual and practical needs of the worshipping communities such as faith or worship leaders, caretakers and musicians, but also those with a wider remit which supports the community's efforts to build better neighbourhoods. The geographic distribution of these paid staff shows that by far the greatest overall concentration is in Oxford (186) followed by Cherwell (81), South Oxfordshire (74), Vale of the White Horse (62) and West Oxfordshire (54). Whilst City of Oxford still exhibits the highest concentration of paid workers per respondent (4.4), Vale of the White Horse emerges as the district with the second greatest concentration (2.2). West Oxfordshire has 1.6.
- **Physical resources.** Responding faith groups provide 254 rooms and halls for use by the worshipping community themselves and 221 for use by other groups. These figures indicate that worship venues are important community facilities. Of the rooms and halls available for use by the worshipping community, nearly 90% are also available for use by other groups in the community. The geographic spread of these rooms and halls is significant as the least densely populated districts of Oxfordshire (West Oxfordshire and the Vale of the White Horse) offer some of the highest numbers of rooms for use by other groups, providing important facilities in Oxfordshire's most rural communities.

- **Green space.** A significant proportion (nearly 40%) of worship venues have green space associated with them, even in city locations. Over 90% of places of worship in small and large villages have green space, 31% of those in suburbs and 24% in market towns. Of those that have green space, almost a third (29%) actively utilise it for environmental projects.
- **Are worshipping communities working together?** Two thirds of respondents have worked with other worshipping communities from within their faith tradition, and 20% have worked with others from a different faith. These results show high levels of joint working within faith traditions, particularly in the more rural districts of West Oxfordshire and the Vale of the White Horse, but also in the City of Oxford.
- **Contributions to other local partnerships.** Respondents were asked about the benefits that their worshipping communities gain from working with other organisations. Key benefits gained from working with a local authority or parish council included wider community awareness and involvement as well as funding opportunities. When working with the police, respondents identified that having good relations, support, assistance and joint working were benefits that they received. An important benefit of working with a local primary care trust was supporting the wider community. At the same time, public sector agencies participating in this research were universally positive about the unique contribution that faith groups can provide to achieving common goals. Despite these positive statements, worshipping communities also identified a number of barriers to working with external agencies. Principal amongst these are a lack of time and resources on the part of worshipping communities, and the perception that relationships with public agencies are bureaucratic and sometimes tinged with mutual suspicion.
- **Assessing the overall contribution to building better neighbourhoods.** When asked about their contribution to building better neighbourhoods in Oxfordshire, 67% of respondents felt that, as a group, their worshipping community made a significant contribution (assessed as 'a fair bit', 'quite a lot', or 'a lot'). Even more, 93% felt that members of their group made significant contributions as individuals in their everyday lives. Within these headline figures,

45% of Church of England respondents and 51% from other Christian denominations assessed their contribution as a group to be 'quite a lot' or 'a lot'. Whilst none of the respondents from other faiths regarded their contribution as a group in this way, assessed at the individual level, a third of respondents from other faiths reported that members of their worshipping community made 'quite a lot' or 'a lot' of a contribution to building better neighbourhoods in Oxfordshire.

Implications and challenges

In addition to mapping and quantifying the activities of worshipping communities in Oxfordshire through the Building Better Neighbourhoods survey, qualitative case study research outlined in this report isolates a number of **important challenges for public sector, organisations and the wider voluntary sector as well as for worshipping communities themselves**, in maximising the impact of faith communities' work to build better neighbourhoods. Specifically these are as follows:

- Despite inherent diversity and variations in the capacity of faith groups to contribute to building better neighbourhoods, at a deep-rooted level the activities of worshipping communities typically share common faith-based motivations or drivers. A key challenge for the public and wider voluntary sectors, therefore, is to extend levels of religious literacy amongst professionals who seek to work in partnership with Oxfordshire's worshipping communities.
- The quantitative benefit of external volunteering in terms of the economic value of hours given each year by worshipping communities in Oxfordshire has been noted. In relation to this, three specific challenges for the public and wider voluntary sectors are apparent:
 - **First**, acknowledgment that specific faith motivations for volunteering are not a barrier to the delivery of beneficial outcomes.
 - **Second**, recognition that the burden of volunteering by worshipping communities can fall heavily upon a core of particularly active or committed individuals who may benefit from help.

- **Third**, appreciation that support made available to the wider voluntary sector, including through the Oxfordshire Compact, should also be open to worshipping communities. Faith communities themselves are not well linked into the support available from the voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations.
- Alongside the contribution of paid staff and volunteers, the wider importance of physical resources such as worship venues or green space as community facilities is striking. The availability and use of rooms and halls other than for worship is noted and underlines the importance of challenging both the public and voluntary sectors to ensure participation of worshipping communities in development and delivery of local community plans and strategies.
- The development of independent or semi-independent faith-based organisations provides a mechanism via which those activities of worshipping communities directed to building better neighbourhoods can be made sustainable, and through which growth and greater impact may be achieved. Whilst such organisations can often find themselves working in partnership with public agencies, they benefit from independence from the statutory sector in determining priorities and ways of working, free from the constraints of an ever-changing public sector policy and resource context. Two challenges arise from this:
 - **First**, for worshipping communities themselves, it is crucial to ensure that effective governance structures are implemented within independent or semi-independent organisations in order that their potential may be fully realised.
 - **Second**, for the public sector, it is essential that contributions made by such organisations are recognised and valued even when they are not seen as aligning to the latest policy objectives.
- By providing formal and informal care and support to others, both within their own faith traditions and in their wider neighbourhoods, Oxfordshire’s worshipping communities are playing an important role in enabling people of different generations, backgrounds and cultures to ‘get on better together’. Alongside good neighbourliness, worshipping communities are instrumental in creating organisations and networks and providing resources and services which help to build bridges within and between people of different faith and people of none. As such, a key challenge for the public sector in particular is to recognise the value of social capital created through such activity, and the ways in which it can be harnessed to help support the achievement of cohesion-related policy goals and the more efficient delivery of public services, including, for example, policing. In this sense, co-operation and collaboration between faiths and the public sector helps to create a vibrant civic culture in which the roles and contributions of worshipping communities to building better neighbourhoods are fully acknowledged and valued.

For further information:

The full report, **Building Better Neighbourhoods: The Contribution of Faith Communities to Oxfordshire Life**, is available online from the OCVA website – www.ocva.org.uk and in hard copy from OCVA: Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action, The Old Court House, Floyds Row, St Aldates, Oxford OX1 1SS
01865 251946 / info@ocva.org.uk
ISBN: 978-1-84600-034-8 [23rd June 2010]

The accompanying Technical Appendix is also available on the OCVA website

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