

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

Heart of the Neighbourhood

How the church is providing essential services in every part of the country

Tuesday 8th September, Attlee Suite, Portcullis House, 1 Victoria Embankment, London SW1A 2LW

Welcome

Zöe Franklin MP, Chair of the APPG on Faith and Society, opened the event, highlighting the report's finding that churches are delivering **more than a quarter of a million essential services**, often weekly. These include:

- Food support and community meals
- Debt and benefits advice
- Mental-health and wellbeing support
- Children's and family services
- Youth work
- Housing and homelessness support
- Support for older people
- Community and social activities

The Gather Movement's research

Roger Sutton and Mark Cowling of the Gather Movement explained that Gather has been developing a systematic way of **mapping what churches and faith organisations actually do within local communities**.

The mapping process involves:

1. Identifying faith centres and organisations within a locality.
2. Establishing what essential services are needed for communities to flourish.
3. Surveying church and faith leaders about the services they provide.
4. Recording where and when services take place.
5. Creating maps and databases that can be used by churches, councils, health services and other organisations.
6. Using the information to build relationships and networks rather than simply producing a directory.

At the time of the event, the project had completed approximately **1,600 surveys across 25 local authorities**, with substantially more work underway. Gather estimated that the

information collected indicated around **250,000 services being delivered across England**, based on extrapolation from the mapped churches.

The research covers areas including:

- Children and families
- Food security
- Mental health
- Housing and homelessness
- Finance and debt
- Youth support
- Community connection

A key finding: the importance of networks

A major theme throughout the event was that **individual churches can achieve more when they work together**.

The speakers argued that the mapping should not simply create a list of services. Instead, it should enable churches to:

- Find out what neighbouring churches are already doing.
- Avoid duplication.
- Share expertise and resources.
- Identify gaps in provision.
- Refer people between organisations.
- Work collectively with councils, NHS services and charities.

Roger Sutton summarised the philosophy with the phrase:

“No silos, no logos, no egos.”

The emphasis was on **relationship-building rather than organisational competition**.

Examples from local communities

Several case studies illustrated how this approach works in practice.

Daniel's Den / 1277

Jo Gordon described the development of Daniel's Den, a network of parent-and-toddler groups in Brent, and the wider 1277 movement. The organisation has more than **5,000 churches involved** and highlights the importance of supporting families during the earliest years of a child's life.

Lincoln mental-health cafés

Simon Hawking described a network of **25 non-clinical, out-of-hours mental-health cafés** across Lincolnshire, each connected to a local church.

The reported figures included:

- Approximately **6,500 people** attending in Lincoln during the year discussed.
- Around **400 diversions from crisis services**.
- A reported study suggesting approximately **£20.07 of NHS savings for every £1 invested** through the programme.
- 90% of attendees reporting improved mental health.
- Around one-third saying they did not subsequently need additional services.

These figures were presented by the project representatives as evidence of the potential impact of church–NHS collaboration.

Bath Church Hubs

Peter Heywood described a network of around **30 churches in Bath**, representing approximately half of the city's churches. The network brings churches, charities and council services together to support children and families, young people, people with disabilities, older people, people experiencing homelessness and people affected by addiction.

The longer-term ambition discussed was for a **church/community hub within approximately a 15-minute walk of most people**.

Coventry

Jane Moffitt and Steve Elton described how mapping in Coventry helped the council and church network understand where services already existed and where gaps remained.

Importantly, the mapping was followed by a **relational partnership approach**, rather than simply producing a database. The partners also identified areas where churches needed additional expertise, including mental-health provision.

Partnership with local government

Representatives from Leicestershire County Council and Hillingdon Borough Council emphasised that councils cannot assume they already understand everything happening in their communities.

They identified several benefits of the mapping:

- Better understanding of local community assets.
- Reduced duplication of services.
- Better signposting and referrals.
- Greater understanding of what residents actually need.
- More effective use of existing community infrastructure.
- Opportunities to work with trusted organisations that may reach people who are reluctant to approach statutory services.

The Coventry experience particularly stressed the importance of **equal partnerships**, rather than councils simply asking churches to deliver council services.

Food security

The discussion on food security broadened the concept beyond food banks.

Professor Diana Smith discussed **food deserts** and the difficulties some communities face in accessing affordable, healthy food.

Dr Megan Blake introduced the concept of “**food ladders**”, describing different forms of community support:

- **Rung 1 – crisis/catching support:** immediate help when someone is in crisis.
- **Rung 2 – building capacity:** helping people develop skills, confidence and resources.
- **Rung 3 – transformation:** communities themselves identifying and pursuing solutions.

The discussion argued that churches can provide both the physical spaces and relationships that connect these different forms of support.

Wider collaboration

The speakers repeatedly stressed that the initiative should **not be restricted to churches**.

Mike Royal of Churches Together in England specifically encouraged collaboration:

- Between different Christian traditions.
- Across ethnic and cultural communities.
- Between Christian organisations and other faith communities.
- Between churches, councils, health services and voluntary organisations.

The Sikh community was mentioned as an example of another faith community making a substantial contribution to food provision.

Maintaining the physical infrastructure

Claire Walker of the National Churches Trust added an important practical consideration: **church buildings themselves are community infrastructure**.

She argued that churches cannot function as community hubs if their buildings are deteriorating or lack basic facilities such as adequate toilets, water and usable space. Maintaining these buildings therefore forms part of the wider infrastructure needed to sustain community services.

York's long-term approach

Rora Crookston and James Topliss shared their experiences from York.

The local network has been working towards a **10-year vision** for a thriving, poverty-free York. Their approach combines:

- A broad analysis of the city.

- Detailed mapping of church activity.
- Leadership development.
- Cross-sector collaboration.
- Local neighbourhood knowledge.
- An emphasis on relationships.

The speakers stressed that the objective is **not necessarily for organisations to do more**, but to become more coordinated and effective.

The York team described their work as addressing “**relational poverty**” as well as financial or material poverty.

The argument was that people may need not only food, housing or financial assistance, but also:

- Friendship
- Belonging
- Community
- Mental-health support
- Hope
- Human connection

Churches were presented as potentially well placed to provide these relationships because they already operate continuously within neighbourhoods.

Overall conclusions and proposed next steps

The event concluded with two major ambitions from Gather Movement:

National mapping

Gather wants to work towards **mapping faith-based community activity in every local authority in the country over the next three years**.

Investment in place-based leadership

Gather also wants investment in local **enablers** who can bring together faith, civic, health and voluntary-sector organisations and turn mapping into sustained collaboration.