



SCPO Briefing Paper

Survey of Scottish Churches' responses to Welfare Reform: Initial Findings

Briefing 15/3, November 2013

Background and Rationale

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office recently designed and distributed a survey with the intention of carrying out research about the role of local churches in responding to social needs within their communities. The survey was titled "Responding to Welfare Reform: Scottish Churches' responses to social need" which reflected our desire to explore whether churches had detected an increasing need for support within their communities as the changes to the welfare system are beginning to take effect – this was particularly reflected in the section about pastoral support needs in the survey. The survey offered respondents the opportunity to share information about the types of support their congregation offered; how they were involved; pastoral care implications; and the impact that involvement in supporting the wider community had on the churches' campaigning work.

A link to the survey was circulated in: SCPO Newsletter and SCPO Update; Church of Scotland Church and Society e-news; Church of Scotland Priority Areas e-news; Go For It fund e-news; and Inspires: the Scottish Episcopal Church e-news. The link was also circulated by email to SCPO contacts, which included an invitation to ecumenical recipients to encourage members to fill in the survey. A link was also displayed on the SCPO website and was publicised on the SCPO Twitter feed.

The survey was open for 6 weeks. 256 responses were submitted. Of this, 151 were completed with consent given to use the information. These will be the responses used in the rest of this report.

This report therefore provides a small snapshot of activity and should be viewed in this light.

Respondents

Denominations

Of the 151 completed responses, the majority were completed by Church of Scotland congregations (130). 4 responses were received from the Scottish Episcopal Church, 3 from the Methodist Church, 2 each from the Baptist Union of Scotland and Congregational Federation, and 1 from the Salvation Army, United Free Church, United Reformed Church, Associated Presbyterian Churches, and the Religious Society of Friends. 2 Local Ecumenical Partnership churches responded, and one Unitarian congregation.

The geographical spread of responses was good, with responses from churches in 30 of Scotland's 32 local authorities.

Top 5 local authorities (number of responses in brackets)

1. Glasgow (17)
2. Fife (11)
3. Highland (10)
- 4=. City of Edinburgh (8)
- 4=. Dumfries and Galloway (8)
- 4=. South Lanarkshire (8)
5. Aberdeenshire (7)

Only 2 local authorities were not reflected in the completed responses: Orkney and Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles). There were also two responses from Church of Scotland congregations in the north of England, one in Northumberland and one in Cumbria.

Types of Projects

Projects that provide food

Most respondents who filled in the survey reported offering some sort of assistance with food provision: 123 of 151 respondents (81%).

Some churches identify organising a project in their own church, but the vast majority of churches report that they contribute goods or volunteers (or both) to another project.

Most of the projects which are reported in this category are projects which provide emergency food provision: food banks, food parcels etc. This usually consists of a collection of non-perishable items which are then distributed as emergency food parcels. Many of those who are involved in food banks report that the services is provided to people who present a voucher, which will have been handed to them by Jobcentre Plus, a healthcare worker, or other statutory agency. The majority of the food banks identified report that they are operating within this voucher-led system, and many of them are organised under the Trussell Trust franchise model. Churches around Scotland are therefore already very involved in the running (and supplying) of food banks which are being relied upon by local and national government agencies to be there to support people in times of need.

Nonetheless, there is a sizeable proportion of food banks reported here which do not report requiring a voucher: an indication, perhaps, of another group of food banks which have been set up independently from the franchise model.¹ More investigation would be required into this, but the anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that this is the case. We would have hoped for a larger return rate on our survey to ascertain to what extent there are independent food banks operating throughout Scotland, but this is something that could form the basis for further investigation.

There are also a number of churches preparing cooked food; this is mostly seen in the form of community cafes, which offer cheap or free cooked food and an opportunity for people to gather together. The churches which run these projects report that the chance for fellowship and a space for people to chat is a key aspect to this type of service.

A few other projects also stood out as particularly innovative responses to locally identified need:

- Providing hot meals during the school summer holidays to children who are in receipt of free school meals during term time;
- A project which encourages cookery skills, particularly with vulnerable families. The emphasis is on promoting positive lifestyles and increased physical and mental well-being;
- Cheap fruit and veg being sold in the church, making fresh produce more affordable [most food banks distribute non-perishable items].

Providing material needs, for example clothing or household goods

Just under half of the responses to the survey also reported that they supplied other material items, excluding food, to people in need. Here the most commonly observed model is that of “starter packs”, which provides a pack of essential household items to people who are moving into new accommodation,

¹ For an interesting example of a foodbank that has set up ‘independently’, with around 20 partners, in its community led by the church, see this blog about the Greater Maryhill Foodbank:

http://cos.churchofscotland.org.uk/blogs/priority_areas/2013/10/09/the-road-less-taken-greater-maryhill-foodbank/

often after a period of homelessness. Again, similarly to food banks, many of the projects which were identified are accessed using a statutory referral system (a voucher system).

Homelessness (including shelters and befriending projects)

Much of the information provided in this section overlapped with the information given in the category above. However, here there are a number of churches which contribute goods or volunteers to already-established projects; Bethany Christian Trust and the Lodging House Mission are two notably mentioned projects in this category.

Debt advice, budgeting skills or credit unions

A far smaller proportion of our respondents indicated that they had any involvement in projects within this category: 20 reported that they are engaged in work in this area, and this is evenly split between churches which run their own projects and churches which provide volunteers or premises.

Christians Against Poverty courses and advice services are the most common way in which churches are involved in debt advice services, though some respondents reported a close working relationship with other organisations, including Citizens' Advice Bureaux.

A few respondents indicated that individual members of their congregation had the relevant expertise to be in a position to offer advice on budgeting skills. Others report having members who had taken the time to complete courses on giving advice, such as completing training with Christians Against Poverty to become a money coach.

Mental health services (including counselling)

Far fewer respondents offered examples of projects within this category, but within this category, the following projects were identified: dementia support groups, bereavement support, and support for mothers with post-natal depression. Some churches also reported the use of their premises by external service providers who offer these services.

Access to computers and /or computing skills

This is a category in which there were relatively few responses, and indeed only one of the respondents who indicated that their church offered access to computers or computing skills made any mention of this when asked to further describe the project.

In light of the 'Digital by Default' aspiration which will lead to the majority of the welfare and benefits system requiring to be administered by claimants online, this is an area in which churches (not just through their premises, but also the expertise of those in their congregation) may be able to make a significant difference in their communities.

Why are churches involved in providing this assistance?

Through a qualitative analysis of the responses given to the question "Why is your church involved in providing this assistance?", a number of trends appeared. The most commonly referred to will be briefly examined in turn:

A Christian response to social need

The terms "mission", "outreach" and "witness" appeared relatively frequently in this section. Below are some quotes which explain the unconditional commitment to social action:

"Because we care for our neighbours, no matter who they are. We are all God's children and should want to help our brothers and sisters who are in need."

"There is significant need within the communities in which we work and we see this as a practical expression of the Christian gospel."

"Simple... read the story of The Good Samaritan. We strive to show God's love through practical

support by serving in our communities”
“compassion according to Mt 25:35”

Identifying unmet need in local community

Some of the answers related to recent economic effects:

“It was felt that there was local need to provide this form of back-up as the new welfare reforms took effect”

“Members are very conscious of the effects of the economic situation in an area with high levels of unemployment and deprivation.”

“rise in food theft crime in area prompted food initiative”

“Government policy is squeezing vulnerable people's budgets to the extent that they have to make tough economical home decisions.”

The majority, however, refer to a more general sense of unmet or increasing need within their community. Interestingly, only one respondent explicitly stated that those whom they are helping may be someone from within their own congregation.

Coming on board with long-established projects and lending a hand to a neighbour

The trend immediately apparent on reading through the responses is that partnership working is central to many of the projects reported. The majority of respondents report that they work with others; nearly half work alongside local community / health / local authority partners, but even more report working with neighbouring churches and the local Christian community.

Several responses indicate that churches had been directly approached by a neighbouring church to become involved. Several churches noted that where there had been an established project already set up, other churches in the local area which had not perhaps given active support before are beginning to lend their support (or getting more involved).

One response also highlights that different types of assistance are all valuable:

“Members acknowledge the need in our community for this help and this is something our ageing congregation is able to do.”

Use of church premises

Church premises are obviously considered valuable community assets, with many references to the use of buildings to facilitate other organisations' work in addition to the church's own work.

Churches report being used as:

- Accommodation for night shelters /drop-ins for the homeless
- Accommodation for support groups of various types

These are just a few examples, but enough to perhaps plant a seed of thought about the different ways in which churches become involved – and stay involved - in this vital work within local communities.

Campaigning

The majority of respondents reported that they have not undertaken any campaigning in relation to alleviating social need – or the welfare reforms more specifically. Within the group of respondents who reported that they have not campaigned, several potential barriers to participation were identified.

The most commonly given reason is a lack of information:, with people saying that before they would campaign they would require:

“Information that tells us how individuals are affected by changes in the welfare system”

“better communication by the campaigners”

“More information on how to go about campaigning about this issue. As far as I can see at present the issue of poverty is major growing concern for all.”

Many respondents indicated that whilst the congregation may seem generally willing, there were practical difficulties in getting involved: Geographical location (some rural congregations felt too remote to participate); ageing congregations; a lack of willing volunteer to take on the initial engagement to get others in the church involved.

Others, however, noted that the link between churches and campaigning was not necessarily clear, and this may cause people to be hesitant in their approach:

“Maybe causes specifically promoted through Presbytery or spoken about during worship would encourage people to pay more attention and see participation as an opportunity to show the love of Christ to others.”

“A greater visibility of churches on demos would help provide a clear lead against those who do not wish the church to appear. Where are the church banners on anti-cuts demos? I hope the current Mission Action Plan for our diocese will result in a greater sense of the possibility and responsibility to help the homeless and those without food.”

“A personal pulpit appeal, relevant to our community and without a political agenda”

One respondent noted that their efforts were focused on service delivery: “We are a hands-on organisation, we are working in the community and are still unsure of the benefits to our clients of campaigning.”

Others noted that whilst they regularly pray for the situations they witness in their local projects, they do not campaign as a congregation.

However, for those who have campaigned, the overall experience was seen to be positive; and respondents who had directly used their experience of being involved in local projects felt that it both enhanced their own understanding of the issues at hand, which in turn made them feel better informed to engage in campaigning and influencing decision-makers:

One respondent notes that the experience gained from doing community work “provides credibility” to the responses made by their church to Government consultations on issues of social justice and welfare. In another case, the commitment to eradicate poverty was a long-standing campaigning ‘ask’, but the involvement in a local project has cemented that project in a tangible way: “Our involvement ... has given an expression to our commitment to help eradicate poverty in the UK.”

This may provide some reassurance to those who may feel concerned about the interaction between service delivery and campaigning activity. Additionally, the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office has a leaflet called “Making a Difference: How to Lobby” which may offer some pointers for church groups or individuals looking to get started in contacting decision-makers. This is available to download from the SCPO website (<http://www.actsparl.org/resources/how-to-lobby.aspx>). It is also possible to arrange for a speaker to come to your church group and run a workshop on the content of this leaflet.

Pastoral Care

For those who have pastoral care responsibilities within their church, there were some additional questions which sought to find out whether there had been a discernible rise in people approaching churches with problems related to changes to the welfare and benefits system.

Of those who reported that they had noticed an increase, around half reported that concerns about the current welfare system, benefit sanctions and changes to disability benefits were on people’s minds. However, the most significant issue was the ‘bedroom tax’ which is causing much anxiety.

In this section, people who have responsibility for pastoral care in churches recorded their experience of more people presenting at churches asking for money; a growing number of people struggling with benefit sanctions imposed and causing hardship, and the worry of the new assessment process for accessing disability benefit. One respondent noted that there had been a shift because people “before, people were very reluctant to speak openly”.

When placed in a situation where someone asks for help, the majority of our respondents in this section, however, **did not feel equipped** to be able to give practical assistance.

Things that they would welcome to feel better equipped include:

“how to access emergency money , who to contact about housing issues, Social work department....

How to access help without dropping people into more trouble.”

“Clear information as to the facts not political fudge”

“Money! A bit facetious perhaps but true!”

However, those who did feel more confident to offer help reported their helpful sources of information as including:

“Hamilton CAB offered excellent introductory sessions on Welfare Reform”

“Knowledge of local helping agencies; a listing of agencies researched and provided by myself to Presbytery; personal contact with leaders of such help agencies.”

“Faith in Community Dundee leaflet”

“We have held information evenings run by the local authority”

Perhaps these provide some ways of equipping people with knowledge, which tackles at least some of the barriers that others have faced in offering help.

Conclusions

This general overview demonstrates that there are many examples of good work going on in Scotland in offering assistance to those who need it. This assistance is made increasingly necessary by a growing number of people in local congregations and the wider community requiring assistance, partly because of the generally poorer economic situation; and partly due to the changes to the welfare benefits system which are now beginning to take effect.

However, the provision of services is only one side of the coin. Tackling the underlying reasons which cause the need for food banks, homeless shelters and crisis assistance is also crucial. This survey has demonstrated that the lack of information is often cited as a barrier to people taking more decisive campaigning action: this is a point for campaigners to note. However the importance of local-led activity has been a strong theme coming out of this survey, and so perhaps churches working together at a local level can pool resources, not only in serving their local communities through practical action, but in speaking out against injustices within society.

We recognise that this could only provide a snapshot; follow-up surveys would need to be completed to determine trends. This report has been written to give a very general overview of the findings from the survey; it is by no means comprehensive. Should you wish further details about the survey, a more detailed breakdown of any of the results, or to receive further information about our leaflet “Making a Difference” please contact Alison Bennett, Research Officer: alison@actsparl.org (0131 220 0246).