

Understanding Our Community

From time to time it is useful to take a fresh look at the communities in which our churches are set. Doing this ensures that our prayer and action are focussed on the real needs of the area and not restricted to the knowledge or impressions that individual members of the congregation may have. The information will help shape priorities for mission, and can be an affirming exercise which demonstrates how much good work is already being done in the local community.

A community audit need not be a massive undertaking. What you need to end up with is something that describes the area, some of the statistics about people living there and their needs, a list of activities undertaken by the church and by others in the locality, and then some sense of key issues that could do with greater attention.

Set up a small group perhaps drawing on people from other congregations in the area or from organisations that might be supportive. As with any project it is worth setting out some terms of reference and being clear about who will have ownership of the final document (it could be the group, the PCC, the incumbent). Think about how the results will be communicated beyond the group. It may be, for example, that you will want to take some photographs for a presentation to the congregation.

Make a map using Ordnance Survey or Google Maps and show where facilities like shops, halls, and housing, places of employment, schools, care and residential homes, are located. It's also worth showing barriers that split or make communication difficult such as busy roads, rivers etc.

Find government and local authority statistics. You can start with key statistics about your parish from the [Church Urban Fund](#) and from the [Church of England's statistics team](#). Don't be put off by the urban in the Church Urban Fund name, statistics for all parishes are available on their site.

Similar local information can be found on the website of the [Office of National Statistics](#) including: age profile, housing tenure, levels of deprivation, families with children and single households, range and proportion of faith communities, minority ethnic communities.

Check for other reports about your area. Local Authority websites are worth searching, and there may be a (civic) parish or town plan that already identifies much of the information you want to gather.

Listen, walk, and pray. Statistics are great but they need to be interpreted with care and may not tell the whole story about your community. Nothing beats a good walk around the area with a notebook and camera. Talk to people on the street; an hour spent outside the village shop on a Saturday morning will probably yield a lot of additional information. A focus group is a good way of getting people to interact with each other but something fun like a table-quiz about the locality could be just as effective. Most importantly, make sure that children, young people, and older people, get to have their say in their own voices.

A prayer walk is well worth the time. As you stroll through the area try to see it through God's eyes, building up your understanding of the community and its needs, and what God would want to see in that place.

Put your report together. A newspaper format or Powerpoint presentation may make it easier for people to digest. List the good things and the more difficult things about life in your community. Celebrate the amazing stuff that people are already doing, especially the good work that is done by others and not just church members. Think about what the church could do to make a difference and to be “good news” to your community. Share your findings, and not just with the congregation; others in the area will be interested in what you have uncovered and may have ideas and resources to share. Don’t just focus on the gaps and unmet needs. One parish had the idea of community breakfasts where people are affirmed and thanked for their contribution to community life.

Some other useful resources

- Open Welcome, a toolkit for rural churches from the team at Germinate, the Arthur Rank Centre.
- Resources from Church Urban Fund to help with planning a project <http://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours/resources>
- Franchise models of church projects and funding: <http://www.cinnamonnetwork.co.uk/>
- A Word Document on community audits can be downloaded from the Parish Resources website.
- Many churches have found the Healthy Churches Handbook by Robert Warren to be a helpful way of developing a vision.
- Diocesan Social Welfare Fund: <http://www.salisbury.anglican.org/mission/social-justice/funds-for-church-related-social-action>

If you would like to discuss this further or feel that some extra support would be useful do contact colin.brady@salisbury.anglican.org

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