A group of people, including a baby, are gathered around a birthday cake. The baby is in the foreground, looking up at the cake. A woman is holding the baby. In the background, a young girl with glasses and a woman are sitting. The cake is decorated with colorful sprinkles and has a single lit candle. The scene is indoors, likely in a church or community hall.

A BIGGER DIFFERENCE: SOCIAL ACTION AND CHURCH GROWTH IN THE DIOCESE OF LIVERPOOL

“We want to make a difference in people’s lives,
but the main difference we want to make is for
them to know God” (Church Leader)

CHURCH
ARMY
.ORG

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IF LIVERPOOL WERE A DIOCESE OF 100 CHURCHES:

74

would be involved
with food banks

48

with toddler groups
or playgroups

44

with lunch clubs
or drop-ins

32

would be involved with
community cafés

26

with pastoral provision
for the community

25

with youth work for the
wider community

21

would be involved with
money matters and
debt advice

17

with breakfast, holiday,
or after-school
children's clubs

16

with provision for
the homeless

...and 30

would be involved with
'other' social action projects

1. INTRODUCTION

The Diocese of Liverpool is asking God for a Bigger Church, so we can make a Bigger Difference - more people knowing Jesus, more justice in the world.

Engaging with church leaders and parishioners, this research explores how Bigger Difference social action - Christians undertaking social action, enabling more people to know Jesus and pursuing more justice in the world - is happening within the diocese and considers how this relates to both the numerical and spiritual growth of the Church in the Diocese of Liverpool.

1.1 Social action

“ Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It can include volunteering, giving money, community action or simple neighbourly acts. ”¹

The boundaries between what is and what is not ‘social action’ are often difficult to define. This definition resonates with how social action is understood by parishes across the diocese. It may take the form of **regular, formally-organised activities** (e.g. through hosting a weekly food bank collection point or running a toddler group) but is also evident in the **generous use of material and finances resources** to local, national and international organisations, in parishes’ involvement in **community activism** and in **small scale neighbourly acts** carried out by parishioners.

For those involved in this project, social action was primarily motivated by a desire to improve the lives of others - both within our local and global communities - yet this desire could not easily be separated from personal and collective understandings of faith, and a desire to make Jesus known in the world.

1.2 Church growth

The Diocese of Liverpool longs for church growth: aiming for 100 new congregations, 1,000 new leaders and 10,000 new disciples.

To support this vision, the diocese has:

- Developed a ‘**Rule of Life**’ - to nurture personal faith
- Encourages parishioners to ‘**Bring One Friend**’ - bringing one person into the regular and serving life of the church
- Asks that parishioners ‘**Do Ten Things**’ - undertake ten acts of service or find ten new points of connection beyond the walls of the church.

It is clear from this vision that both social action and church growth are central to the strategy of the diocese.

The growth presented in this report is more than numerical: congregations and individual parishioners may grow spiritually through connecting social action with faith.

1.3 Methods

In 2017, parishes were asked to include information about their involvement with social action in their Statistics for Mission returns. This is used as we seek to understand how parishes are seeking to bring more justice to the world.

To understand this further and explore the relationship between social action and church growth, conversations were also had with church leaders and parishioners. Several parishes across the diocese were approached to be involved with this aspect of the project - hoping to engage those in different geographical contexts across the diocese and those with Sunday congregations varying in size and churchmanship.

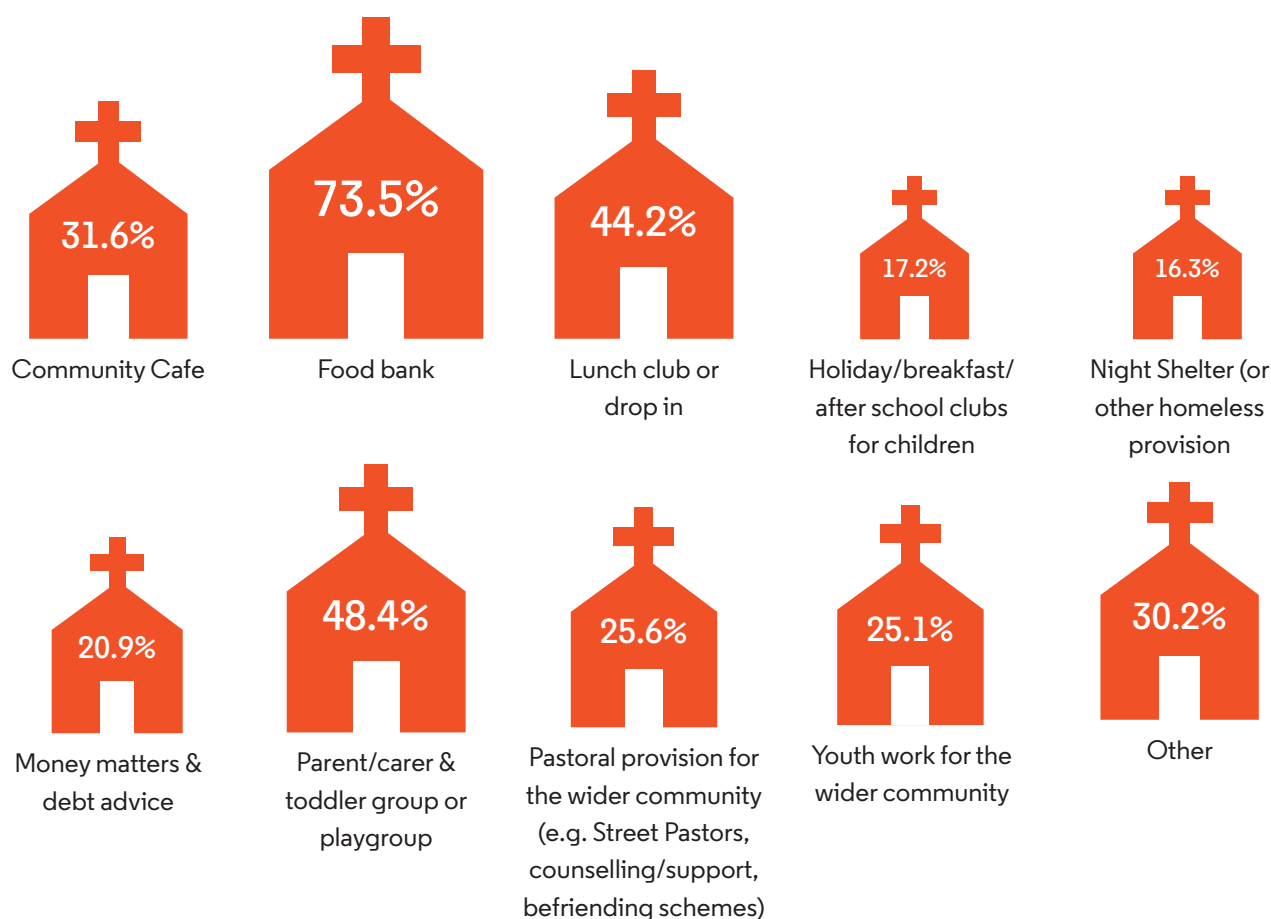
Four agreed to take part: St Stephen, Hightown; St Mary, Wavertree; St Bartholomew, Roby and St Francis and St Barnabas, Wigan. 7 church leaders (both ordained and lay) and 20 parishioners took part in interviews and focus groups exploring how their parishes were seeking to fulfil the diocese’s vision.

¹ Department for Digital, Culture, media and Sport and Office for Civil Society (2016) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/centre-for-social-action/centre-for-social-action>

2. SOCIAL ACTION IN THE DIOCESE

2.1 Social action activities

In the 2017 Statistics for Mission, churches were asked which social action activities they engaged with (this included running, hosting, partnering or supporting an activity):



30.2% of churches listed another social action activity, in addition to the nine offered in the survey question. These are listed in [Appendix 1](#).

Demonstrating the breadth of what is defined as social action in the diocese, these included a diverse range of activities (alongside considerable with the nine pre-categories).

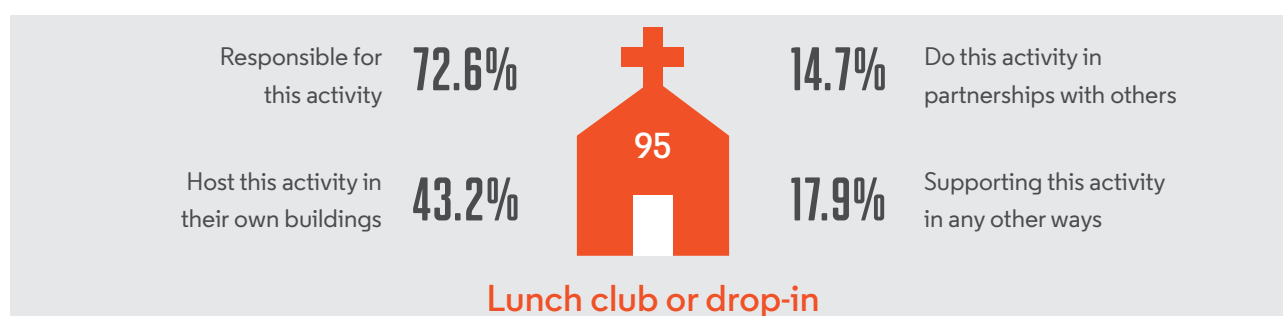
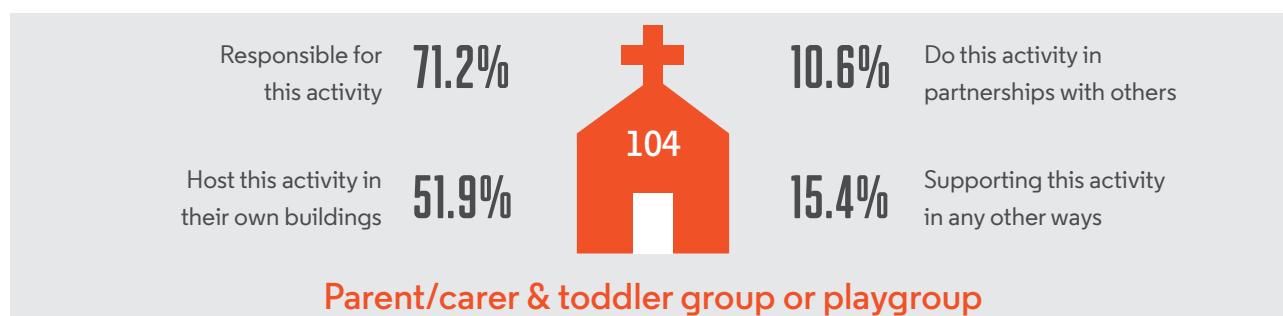
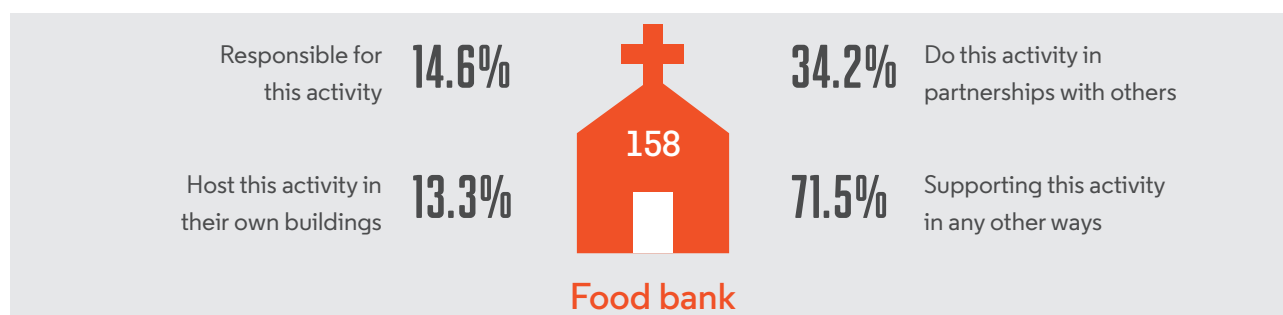
These can be subdivided into the following categories:

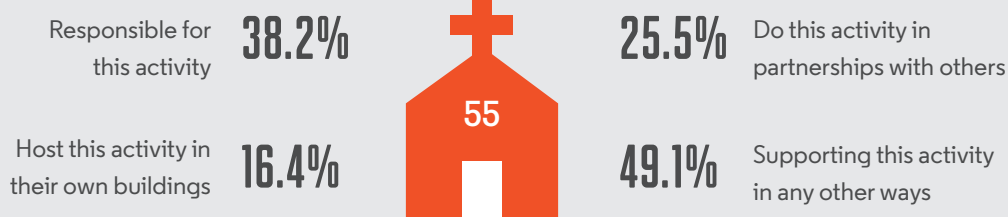
- Social and support groups
- Uniformed organisations (e.g. Scouts/Brownies)
- Community-related meetings
- Crafts-based activities
- Performing arts, social and community events
- Support for people with addictions
- Engagement with refugees and asylum seekers
- Activities which support the disabled, elderly or unemployed

2.2 How are churches engaging?

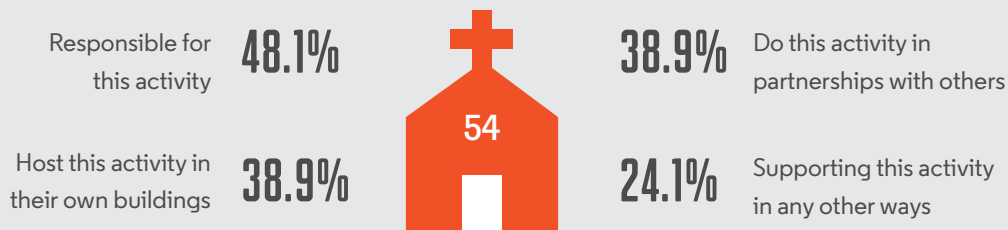
Churches were asked how they were engaging with social action - they could select more than one option. An alternative visualisation is presented in [Appendix 2](#):

No. of churches in the diocese
involved in an activity (of 215):

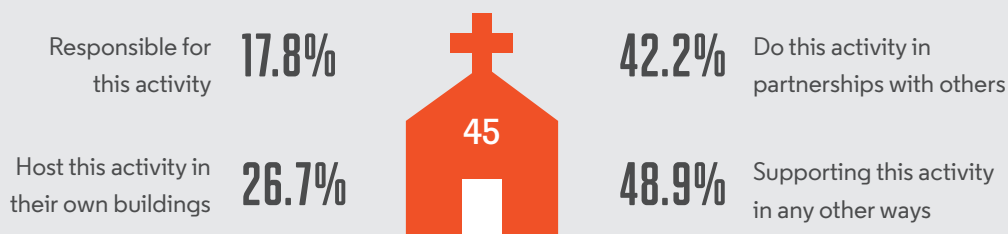




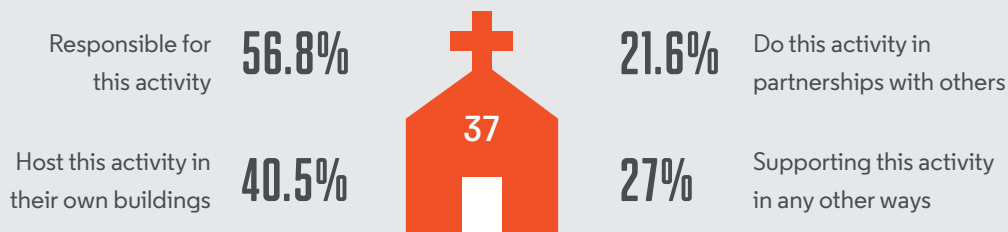
Pastoral care for wider community



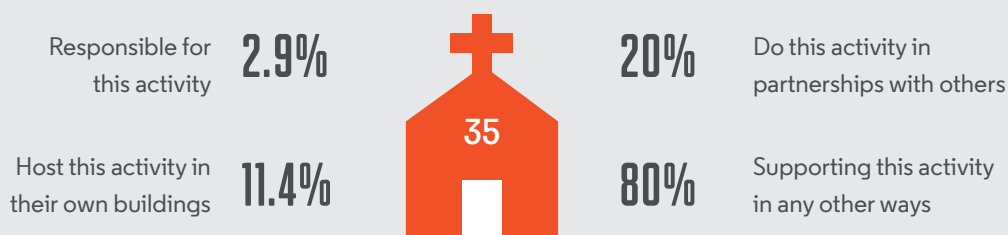
Youth work for wider community



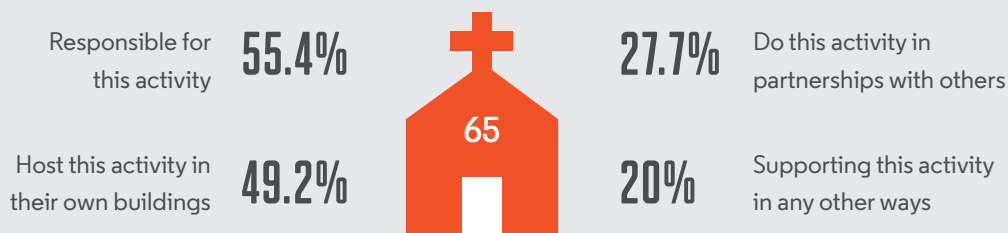
Money matters & debt advice



Holiday/breakfast/after school clubs for children



Night shelter or other homelessness provision

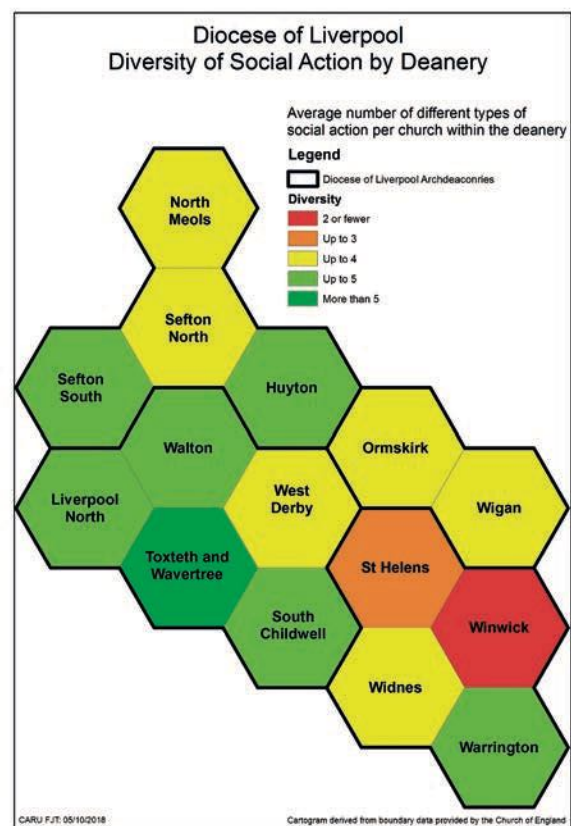
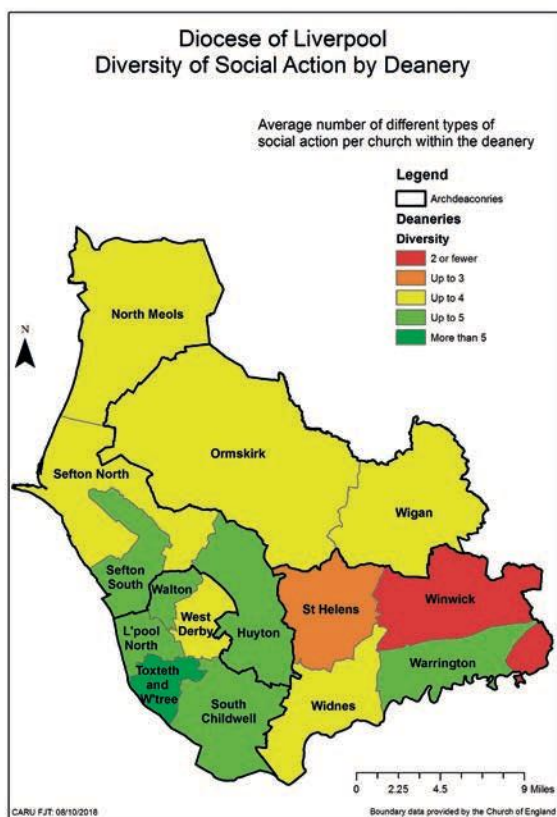


Other activities

2.3 Where is social action happening in the diocese?

Social action is happening across the diocese. Using the Statistics for Mission data, the map below highlights at deanery level where parishes are involved in multiple, different social action activities.

The cartogram below displays the same data as the map, but each deanery is represented by the same size of hexagon. This visualisation emphasises the diversity of types of social action being undertaken by the churches, rather than the geographical size of the deanery.



Churches within the majority of deaneries engage with an average of three or more different types of social action (coloured yellow, light green and dark green). On average, churches within Toxteth and Wavertree deanery engage with more than five types, while those in Winwick deanery, on average, engage with two or fewer. Deaneries within the south-west of the diocese contain churches engaging with more types of social action.

2.4 Social action: beyond 'activities'

Churches in the diocese understand social action as broader than the regular, formally-organised activities offered in the Statistics for Mission survey.

Church leaders and parishioners identified other types of social action, including:

- One-off events to bring communities together (often with the aim of reducing social isolation) e.g. Summer and Christmas fetes; Harvest supper meals
- Generous use of material and financial resources to local, national and international charities e.g. Christian Aid week; the Christmas Shoebox appeal; sponsoring the education of a child overseas

- Involvement in local and national politics/activism (either formally or through individual members) e.g. through social media campaigns, letters to MPs
- Small-scale (potentially unnoticed) neighbourly acts e.g. maintaining the church gardens to provide a green space for those in inner cities; use of Fairtrade products

As these examples suggest, social action may be driven by individual parishioners.

Case Study 1 invites church leaders to consider how they can encourage and release parishioners to champion individual social action projects or causes.

CASE STUDY 1: What are the passions of those in your congregation? Encouraging social action 'champions' at St Bartholomew's, Roby



St Bartholomew's, Roby, one of the larger churches in the diocese, has a wide range of activities which parishioners described as social action. For example, their toddler group, which has been running for 32 years, aims to teach younger children and their carers about Jesus and also to provide a meeting place for parents, grandparents and childminders to help prevent social isolation. Similarly, a bi-monthly Lunch Club provides a low cost meal and a place of fellowship for those from the wider community. Many of the activities at St Bartholomew's have been initiated, supported and sustained through formal church structures. However, they have also found that social action is not always instigated within the walls of the church; it may develop through the passions and callings of individual parishioners who become 'champions' for specific causes.

Five years ago, recently two retired parishioners started to ask God to show them a charity they could serve. Stumbling across those doing a food bank collection at their local supermarket they felt prompted to find out more. Their passion and sense that God has called his Church to feed the poor led them, with permission from their vicar, to address the Sunday congregations

and begin weekly collections for Foodbank. Because of their commitment and continued efforts to regularly raise awareness amongst congregation members, St Bartholomew's donated over a tonne of food last year to Knowsley Foodbank, coordinated by [The Big Help Project](#).

Through articles in the church magazine and posters around the church building, congregation members also regularly hear about [SHARe](#): an organisation that supports asylum seekers and refugees in Knowsley. St Bartholomew's connection with SHARe has developed through one parishioner's growing involvement in the organisation - he now sees himself as a 'rep' for the charity within the church and has run sessions as part of a lent course to begin to explore how the church can engage with refugees in their community.

What can church leaders learn from this case study?

It is valuable to consider how you can release congregation members to listen to God and follow their particular passions. Then, allow regular space in Sunday services/at PCC meetings for individuals to raise awareness and educate others about these causes.

2.5 Social action in partnership

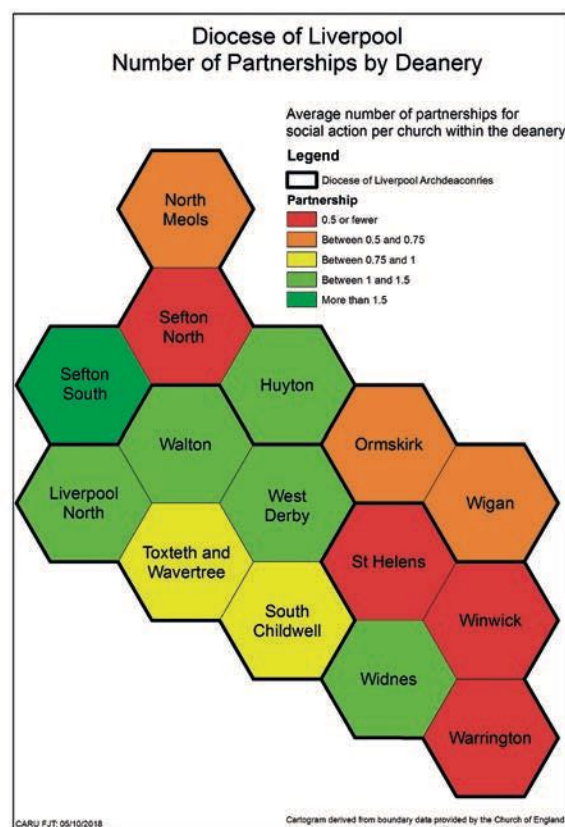
Parishes across the diocese are partnering with other churches, charities, community groups and faith groups in social action in their local communities. At times, this may be the most appropriate way for parishes to respond to the needs of their local communities.

Partnership working may take various forms, depending on the resources needed and available, including:

1. Parishes and partnership organisations **formally working together** to deliver a project or service
2. Parishes **allowing partner organisations to use their buildings** (potentially at reduced rates), acknowledging when partnership organisations are best placed to meet the need
3. Parishes encouraging parishioners to **volunteer at partner organisations**

Case Study 2 encourages church leaders how social action can flourish through listening and responding to the needs of the community, and being open to work in partnership with local services and charities.

The cartogram to the right highlights at a deanery level where churches are involved in partnership working. Only those within the deanery of Sefton South work with, on average, more than 1.5 partners, while Huyton, Widnes, as well as the deaneries within the archdeaconry of Liverpool, all have churches working on average with at least 0.75 partners. Churches in deaneries to the north and east of the diocese work with fewer partners.



CASE STUDY 2: “It wasn’t intended to be a job club, it was just a drop-in place”: St Mary’s, Wavertree responding to the needs of the local community



[Lilyfield](#) began 7 years ago: the local community centre had recently closed and the curate at the time noticed that the people who went there now had nowhere to go. She offered the church building as a drop-in space for people to gather - the gathering was named Lilyfield.

Over the years Lilyfield has evolved. At the heart of its development has been St Mary’s **desire to respond to the needs of their local community, and work in partnership with other local organisations**. As people started to come to the drop-in morning, clergy and volunteers heard that many were struggling with the job centre - cutbacks meant that staff no longer had as much time to offer personal support for people looking to find jobs. Some parishioners had recently retired; they had both the time and skills to be able to support people with job searches. **Matching skills with need**, St Mary’s developed a relationship with a local job centre and began the Lilyfield Job Club, providing both computers and support for those looking for work. Now meeting weekly, Lilyfield also hosts a free café, with homemade cakes and sofas for people to sit and chat, and a Keep Fit class is run by an outside organisation who use the church building. It has also become a hub for local services - hosting monthly drop-in sessions with local councillors and providing a space for community police officers to engage with the community.

For some, Lilyfield has become more than just a place to find a job, keep fit or have a cuppa. It is a space

where they belong and can gently explore questions of faith through conversations and offers of prayer with the Christian volunteers. Some Lilyfield regulars have become volunteers themselves or have started to engage with other activities offered within the wider church community.

With further closures to local community buildings, such as a community day centre for those with additional needs, St Mary’s has **continued to adapt** - now providing a weekly [Local History Group](#), in partnership with health and wellbeing charity [Imagine Independence](#), which particularly caters for those with additional needs. Last month a new group started: Natter. This is a group for the over 60s, with the aim to combat isolation and loneliness - particularly for those who are grieving after the loss of a partner. Church leaders hope that in time, as elements of spirituality are gradually introduced, this may develop into a new congregation.

What advice would they offer other churches looking to engage in social action projects?

“Don’t be afraid to try different things: some things will work, and some things may not work, it’s still worth trying them. And even if you’ve only got a small group of volunteers, try and link up with other local groups. Maybe link up with your local councillor, see what the need is in your community and how you can respond to it in a small way.”

3. WHAT MOTIVATES SOCIAL ACTION?

Four overlapping reasons motivated church leaders and parishioners to social action:

Social action to:

SERVE THE COMMUNITY.

Church leaders and parishioners spoke of their desire to “help”, “serve” and “be a listening ear” in their communities, without a specific evangelistic agenda. They hoped the actions of the parish would improve people’s lives and wellbeing. For some this extended to sharing resources (e.g. allowing community groups to use their building space free of charge). This language was at times rooted in a sense of “duty to Christ” - responding to his call to “feed the poor” and “help the needy” - or a sense of individual calling from God.

TELL PEOPLE ABOUT GOD.

At times, social action work undertaken by a parish was framed as a form of “outreach”/“mission”: meeting a social need may be accompanied by offers of prayer or conversations about faith. Several shared that although social action may be motivated by a desire for people to encounter God, verbally ‘telling’ people about God in spaces where they were ‘doing’ social action was approached with caution. Telling people about God was more likely to be positioned as “showing people God’s love”, “being light and hope in the darkness” and “witnessing our faith without pushing it in people’s faces”.

ADDRESS AN INJUSTICE.

Some spoke of a desire to act being motivated by a perception of societal injustice (“the government is sort of to my mind standing on disadvantaged people, pressing them down even more”). Despite the language of justice being used in the diocesan vision statement, it was not often used by those in this project to explain their call to action.

GET PEOPLE INTO CHURCH.

Connected but distinct to telling people about God, social action was also presented as a way to “get people over the doorstep” into the church building. This imagery suggests that once there, they may go on to have encounters with God/Christians in this space. “The aim of our toddler group is really to bring families over the church doorstep, to provide an introduction to the church and maybe a stepping stone into the church family.”

These categories were **not mutually exclusive**; both clergy and parishioners acknowledged that social action activities could be driven by multiple desires:

“ I think our holiday club is a part of our outreach... we have families in this village, the holidays are a time that are difficult for parents, they have to find time and if that’s something we can give to our children and we can do some Christian teaching at the same time then why would we not do it?... You know, so all sorts of bits of social action, and some of this is around social inclusion and some of it’s around bringing people to Christ and some of it’s a mixture of both isn’t it? ” Parishioner

Case Study 3 reflects on how motivations for both individuals and parishes may evolve over time.

CASE STUDY 3: Unexpected beginnings: social action evolving out of fundraising at St Stephen's, Hightown



“How can we raise money to repair our church porch?” In 2013 this was the main question on the minds of St Stephen's PCC. It led to two initiatives: a Thursday craft group to produce products to be sold at the church coffee mornings, and the formation of a social committee to host fundraising events.

Five years later the church porch has long since been repaired and these initiatives are flourishing. 18 people regularly attend the weekly craft group which often produces dolls' clothes, baby blankets and tea cosies. The social committee hosts monthly events which include an annual Ladies Day, garden parties, quiz nights, the 'Sherry, Soup and Simple dessert' evening in the winter and a New Year's Eve party that was attended by 80 people from Hightown last year. But as they have evolved, these initiatives have become about more than fundraising for the church.

Parishioners running the craft group now see it as an important form of social action - reaching out to, in particular, the elderly community in Hightown who may be lonely and isolated. The group has welcomed those who would not normally enter the building and showed them it is not the dark and serious place they may

remember from their childhood. Friendships have been formed and, through encountering the parishioners who run the sessions, those who attend now know a Christian they could speak with in times of trouble.

Similarly, the social activities have brought the church into the heart of the Hightown community, with events becoming a focal point for those who may not previously have got out in the winter months. Fundraising is still an important element of the events, but the church is no longer the sole benefactor. **Demonstrating the generosity of Christ**, funds are now often raised for local causes, with the group now having a new mission: to bring people together and bless the community of Hightown.

What advice would they offer other churches looking to engage in social action projects?

“The church hall might be your first step into church... it's got to be a welcoming place as much as the church.” And for those looking to set up a social committee: “brainstorm a few ideas...be proactive in asking people to be involved...and have a bit of fun with fundraising along the way.”

3.1 Unpicking our motivations: social action and evangelism

“There is a danger of it becoming a social club... should we be evangelising wherever we can? Do we?” Parishioner

These questions elude to the tension surrounding the relationship between social action and evangelism.

Church leaders in particular wrestled with this issue. For some, this began by reflecting on whether what they were doing was more than “social work”².

One suggested that the difference was that the work of the parish was “underpinned by prayer and teaching...it’s not just doing good for doing good’s sake, but it has a purpose.” Another explained how they moved beyond becoming discouraged when other Christians criticised the work of their parish as “only” social work:

“It used to knock me down, but then I think, ‘Well, actually the first social worker was God.’ Because, you know, you read the Old Testament and He used to say, you know, ‘Don’t clean to the end of the field. Don’t take all the grapes off the vines. Leave it for those who are vulnerable. Those ... you know, the widows... Leave it for them.’ And you think, ‘Well, that’s social work.’ He wasn’t saying, ‘Stand there and tell them, you know, about me.’ He was saying, ‘Leave this stuff.’ And it’s caring, isn’t it, is that. So, it doesn’t bother me now when people say, ‘All you’re doing is social work’, because I’m doing what God calls us to do. He cares about those who haven’t got a voice...if the church isn’t gonna use His voice for those who can’t, then we’ve lost something vital.” Church Leader

Parishes undertaking Bigger Difference social action need to grapple with questions such as:

Is demonstrating God’s love to people in your community ‘enough’?

Is it ‘enough’ for those coming into our buildings to have encountered a Christian, so they know someone they could speak to about faith if they wanted to?

Should a more proactive approach be taken?

For some, the answers to these questions can be guided by their theology; however, as one church leader indicated, this may be an area in which church leaders need further support and guidance:

“We talked with the Archdeacon about this. How do you try and bring a little bit of that explicit without everybody going ‘Woaaaaah, oh I don’t want to hear that!’ and running away. I don’t know. And we still don’t know how we do now.” Church Leader

² The term “social work” was used by three church leaders. Its use and the discussion above may suggest a need for the communication of more nuanced language to enable church leaders to articulate why their parishes are engaging in social action.

4. SOCIAL ACTION AND CHURCH GROWTH

Church growth can be understood as both numerical and spiritual.

Conversations with church leader and parishioners suggest that social action can lead to both types of growth.

4.1 Numerical growth

“The numbers are small, what we do is small. But these individuals, they’re important to God.”
Church Leader

As suggested in the previous section, numerical growth may not be the primary (or even secondary) motivation for parish engagement in social action.

Conversations with church leaders and parishioners found that:

- Numerical growth of Sunday congregations through involvement with social action was identified by all parishes
- Church leaders perceived that Sunday congregation growth was small in numbers (although parishes were often engaging with large numbers in conversations about faith throughout the week)
- Church leaders and parishioners perceived that Sunday congregation growth was often a slow process - at times taking years to see any ‘fruit’
- More typically, social action activities led people to greater involvement in the wider church community (e.g. attending other parish-led events/activities) - this may or may not eventually lead onto Sunday attendance
- Church leaders and parishioners perceived that social action leading to increased Sunday congregational growth was particularly evident through child-based activities (e.g. toddler groups, uniformed groups, engagement with local schools, performance of the offices - baptisms and confirmations); these activities connected both children and their parents/carers into the life of the parish

As church leaders grappled with how to be a Bigger Church and Making a Bigger Difference, they hoped that by introducing communities to God’s love and His people, and welcoming them into church buildings, numerical growth may occur.

However, they recognised that this ‘growth’ may be not always be evident within their usual Sunday congregation statistics:

“We’re trying to make a bigger difference to people’s lives obviously and the real bigger difference has got to be in knowing God for themselves. However, we are content with accepting people as they are, so if they don’t want to come into church, we’re not going to say we’re not going to care about you and we’re not going to be interested in you if you don’t, because we want to love them as they are. But we would hope that sooner or later the impact on that would be that it would be easier for them to come in to some kind of church activity.”
Church Leader

“They might not be here on a Sunday but if their life has been impacted by God so that they’re living missionally then that is still bigger church making a bigger difference; it’s just not ‘bums on seats’ and it doesn’t affect statistics in a way that people want to measure.”
Church Leader

4.1.1 New congregations and social action

Each of the parishes had considered whether the social action activities they engage with may lead to the development of a new congregation/fresh expression of Church. Some would benefit from further support in this area:

“They’re not going to come to the half-ten service, but maybe, maybe they will, but maybe even if they don’t, we’ll make that connection with them on a faith way. And what we’ve got to struggle with, I think, is how we do that. It’s frustrating, because we feel we’ve got connections with an awful lot of people, but we’re not converting that into a worshipping community. And that’s what we really feel we want to.”
Church Leader

Questions for church leaders to ask when considering how social action can lead to a new congregation include:

What are the hopes and desires of those we are engaging with?

How can we introduce spiritual elements into existing social action activities? (this may be most appropriate before or after the main purpose of the activity)

Can those attending the social action activity be integrated into the existing Sunday congregation? What is needed to prepare the existing congregation? Is a new congregation more appropriate?

Case Study 4 provides an encouraging example of how, in answering these questions, one parish is developing a new Sunday afternoon congregation.

CASE STUDY 4: “I want to go to church”: How a drop-in led to a new Sunday congregation at St Barnabas and St Francis, Wigan



In 2014, observing social isolation, addiction and geographical struggles (such as people carrying heavy bags on the 20 minute walk back from their nearest food bank), St Barnabas and St Francis felt prompted to do something to help. Working in partnership with local organisations, they developed a drop-in gathering, opening the church each weekday from 2.30-4pm. Run by volunteers from the churches, the drop-in has become a space where people are welcomed and accepted, can have a coffee and a conversation or engage with the other partnership organisations, such as Addaction or a local women’s group who regularly attend. Previously hosting a food bank, the drop-in is now the site of a ‘food outlet’ where members can access high quality food that would otherwise have been wasted, for a low cost.

Since February 2018, a new Sunday congregation has emerged from these drop-in afternoons. Its evolution has been slow, responding to the desires of those using the service. A year before, the congregation started running a daily prayer time before the food outlet opened. This included a ‘breaking of the bread’ gathering two times a week. Slowly word spread, and

people would arrive early and ask to be prayed for. Congregation members prayed for them but also encouraged and supported them to pray themselves. Conversations continued into the drop-in afternoons and some began to ask if they could come to church. From these questions and through listening to those asking them, a new worshipping community emerged. It started in the church hall but those attending began to ask, ‘When can we go to church?’, so it quickly moved into the church itself. At this time, church leaders felt it was not appropriate to fully integrate the new and existing congregations. Instead, 10-15 adults, plus children, now gather each Sunday afternoon for an informal, participatory service. Looking ahead, there are hopes that those attending will over time lead the service themselves.

What advice would they offer other churches looking to engage in social action projects?

“If God’s put it on your heart, do it.” “Don’t be discouraged by people saying: ‘it’s just social work.’” Partner with local organisations; don’t wait to have everything you need in place. Then listen and respond to those who attend.

4.2.1 Spiritual growth of congregations

Church leaders worked hard to ensure formal, regular social action activities were connected into the life of their Sunday congregations.

This was achieved through:

- Regular notices about social action activities - including sharing 'good news' stories
- Praying about social action activities during intercessions
- Inviting outside organisations to introduce their work to Sunday congregations (e.g. [Safe Families for Children](#), [Christian Aid](#))
- Including biblical teaching on social action in Sunday sermons or Bible studies

Congregations grew spiritually through their parish's involvement with social action:

“(Running these social action activities) is making us more of a family and that love of Christ. Jesus calls us to love God, love one another. When we do that it makes a difference, that loving one another means everybody. And it's learning to accept people... they take drugs, take alcohol. Sometimes they come in and they're a bit off their heads. The next time they come in that's not held against them. It's a fresh start.” Church Leader

“I think it helps parishioners to see the church is relevant to the community and is making a difference. It's not just somewhere that's, something self-indulgent on a Sunday morning, but actually that faith has to be expressed by giving back, giving to others and sharing some of the benefits we've got from our faith with those who maybe haven't reached that point.” Church Leader

Social action led to new leaders emerging. Parishioners often had to undertake new leadership roles on social action activities. In the example from Case Study 4, parishioners who led on social action projects transferred their leadership skills in the social action activities to co-lead the new congregation. They hoped in the future the leadership of this congregation would be taken over by those attending.

4.2.2 Spiritual growth of individual parishioners

Being engaged in social action influenced the personal faith journey of parishioners - although some struggled to articulate how. Others detailed how it led to personal spiritual growth:

“I think for me like faith-wise, it's made me more aware that people matter. And that it's important you need to see people as Christ sees them and also making time for people. I love lunch club, it can be hard work...I'm trying to make time to go and sit at the tables with people and spend time talking to them.”

“Because I'm more aware now of what's going on, my prayers have changed.”

“I think it makes your faith stronger because you see things happen.”

“It's made me far more conscious (of social issues)”

“You've got to rely on Him all the time.”

Parishioners identified other positive benefits of their personal involvement in social action, including the development of supportive friendships with other volunteers and (particularly for retired parishioners) feeling valued and being enabled to put their skills to use.

5. ENCOURAGING OTHER CHURCHES: 10 WORDS OF WISDOM

Is your parish thinking about how to engage further with social action?

10 words of wisdom from church leaders and parishioners already engaging in social action:

1. Pray
2. Don't be afraid to fail
3. Listen to what is needed in the local community and see where this overlaps with the skills and passions of parishioners
4. Be proactive in finding other parishioners to be involved - they may not have the confidence to volunteer themselves
5. Partner with other organisations who may already have the skills and experience
6. Don't wait until everything is in place - or you may never get started
7. Activities do not have to be based out of the church building, but if they are do what is possible to make your buildings welcoming, accessible spaces - it may be people's only experience of church
8. Think about how to introduce elements of faith to each activity: this can be small e.g. offers of prayer or inviting people to other church activities
9. Don't worry if the numbers are small: each individual is important to God
10. Look after both your clergy and your volunteers to prevent burnout

6. KEY LEARNING

6.1 For church leaders

Understanding social action:

- All parishes can seek to make a bigger difference in their communities - **social action is not just for large, well-resourced parishes**
- Social action is understood by parishes in this diocese as **more than regular, church-based activities** - it is also the one-off events, our use of resources, involvement in politics and small neighbourly acts
- Social action may evolve from unexpected beginnings (e.g. through fundraising)

How can I support Bigger Difference social action in my parish?

- Where appropriate, **seek to work in partnership** with other churches, charities, faith groups - this is often a valuable way to effectively engage with local communities and share resources
- **Support parishioners in their individual passions** for social action, considering how to enable their engagement with Sunday congregations
- **Prepare Sunday congregations** to welcome newcomers who have come through social action activities: the level of welcome on Sundays should mirror those of the social action activities
- **Reflect on how social action relates to evangelism/ outreach** in the parish - this may involve exploring how to incorporate spiritual elements into social action activities
- Regularly seek to **connect social action with Sunday services** - this can be through teaching, intercessions, notices or inviting visiting speakers
- **Provide space for parishioners** involved in social action to reflect on how this impacts their personal faith journeys

6.2 For the diocese

- There is a large breadth and wealth of social action taking place across the diocese
- Conversations with church leaders and parishioners suggest that **social action is leading to both numerical and spiritual growth** (A Bigger Church, Making a Bigger Difference) - more statistical data is needed to reinforce this finding.
- Large numbers of people are brought into contact with Christians each week in this diocese through social action activities. Here they may explore questions of faith and 'encounter' Jesus (either through hearing about him directly or witnessing the actions of Christians). Anecdotal reports of numerical growth of Sunday congregations suggest movement between social action activities and Sunday congregations may be small-scale and slow. Instead, social action may be a stepping stone into wider church activities (or other churches/commitments of faith) rather than Sunday congregations. This may have ramifications for how the diocese measures church growth and 'counts' the 10,000 new disciples.
- Definitions of social action used by parishes in the Diocese of Liverpool go beyond the examples in the 2017 Statistics for Mission question. **A broader definition** would encompass: regular, formally organised activities; one-off events; the giving of material and financial resources; community activism; and small-scale neighbourly acts.
- This research found that the **5 marks of mission** provided a useful language to enable parishes to articulate why they engage in social action and identify aspects where they could be engaging further. They could be used as a tool to support parishes struggling to engage with social action.

6.3 Areas where further diocesan support may be beneficial

Further support may be beneficial to support parishes to both articulate and undertake Bigger Difference social action, specifically this support may include enabling church leaders (and by extension parishioners) to:

- Explore and articulate the relationship between social action and evangelism
- Where appropriate, introduce spiritual elements in and around social action activities
- Integrate social action into Sunday teaching
- Theologically equip parishioners to understand and articulate Bigger Difference social action, exploring how and why what they are doing is related to their faith - the development of accessible resources may be needed to do this
- Transition midweek conversations about faith into numerical church growth of Sunday congregations and/or develop new congregations/fresh expressions of Church out of social action activities.

7. APPENDICES

Appendix 1

A selection of 'other' social action activities listed by churches on the Statistics for Mission return in addition to the nine offered in the survey:

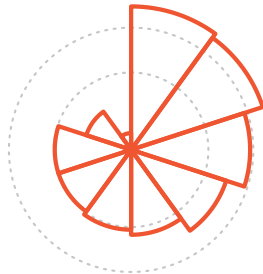
AA group	Dig and Grow for primary school children	Police surgeries
Bonfire night	Evangelism programme	Rainbows
Bowls club	Family day	Residents' groups
Boys Brigade	Film club	School support
Brownies	Fundraising for charity	Scouts
Care home visits	Guides	Scrabble club
Christmas fete	Holiday club	Sex worker drop-in
Clothes bank	Initiatives around housing	Soup kitchen
Clubs for older people	Initiatives focused on food waste	Summer fete
Collection for baby basics	Job club	Summer recitals
Communion services for residential care home	Local councillor drop-ins	Support for refugee and asylum seekers
Community clean-up	Martial arts	Support group for disabled people
Community forums	Messy Church	Village fete
Community shop	Music club	Weight Watchers
Crafts club	Narcotics group	Welcome events for university freshers
Cubs	Open Church	Work placement programme
Dance groups	Parents' support group	Youth orchestra
Dementia café	Pensioners tea and bingo event	

Appendix 2

Social Action in the Diocese of Liverpool

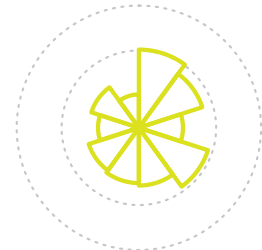
Run

Toddler/playgroups are the most frequently run social action activity.



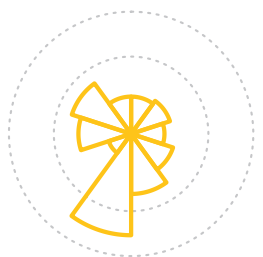
Host

Toddler/playgroups are the most frequently hosted social action activity, closely followed by other activities.



Partner

The social activity most partnered with is food banks.



Support

The most supported activity is also food banks, by a large margin.



Using the data from Statistics for Mission returns, the rose plots above visualise the ways in which local churches have engaged with social action activities. It shows the percentage of churches across the diocese engaging with each type of activity, and the maximum levels of their engagement. The central rose indicates the total percentage of churches involved, while the subsidiary plots pick out the different levels of engagement in each activity.

Toddler/play groups are the most common social action activity to be run by a congregation, with 34% of churches doing so (red segments). A further 10% host toddler/play

groups (green segments), while 2% partner to run these groups (yellow segments) and 1% support them in other ways (blue segments).

While only 11% of churches run food banks, they are by far the most supported social action activity in the diocese, with 74% of churches engaging with these in some way.

Supporting the homeless through a night shelter or other provision is the least common social action activity with only one church reporting that they run such a project. However, 16% of churches are involved in provision for the homeless in running, hosting, partnering or supporting projects.

Statistics for Mission 2017 returns data

Please tick all that apply to your church. Please tick as many columns as apply for each activity	Our church is responsible for running this activity	Our church hosts this activity in its own building(s)	Our church does this activity in partnership with others (e.g. a church, charity, community group, faith group)	Our church supports this activity in other ways e.g. volunteers, donations	Number of churches ticking at least one option.
Parent/carer and toddler group or play group	74	54	11	16	104
Lunch club or drop in	69	41	14	17	95
Community cafe	51	30	12	15	68
Other community activity (please specify)	36	32	18	13	65
Youth work (for wider community)	26	21	21	13	54
Food bank	23	21	54	113	158
Holiday/ Breakfast/ After- school clubs for children	21	15	8	10	37
Pastoral provision for the wider community (e.g. Street Pastors, counselling/ support, befriending schemes)	21	9	14	27	55
Money matters & debt advice	8	12	19	22	45
Night shelter or other homelessness provision	1	4	7	28	35

Number of churches = 215

Multiple churches have ticked yes to more than 1 box for each question line.

Thank you

We are most grateful for the goodwill, time and engagement of all those who have shared their stories and insights. In addition, for the help of the Church of England's Research and Statistics unit who collected, through the annual Statistics for Mission returns, the social action data and made these available to us.

Church Army's Research Unit

Seeing and sharing what God is doing in mission

Report commissioned by the Diocese of Liverpool

Conducted in 2018 by Church Army's Research Unit

Dr Naomi Maynard, Project Lead and Research Associate

What we do

Church Army's vision is for everyone everywhere to encounter God's love, and be empowered to transform their communities through faith shared in words and action.

Our Research Unit exists to help the Church in the British Isles and Ireland more fully realise how God is active in mission and to grow in understanding as to why churches' participation may falter or flourish. We work towards this through the provision of excellent and innovative research and consultancy that seeks to address these questions.

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