



Good Faith  
Partnership

# Recovery & Renewal - Church Collaboration on Social Action in Bristol

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# Contents

- 03 Introduction & Methodology
- 04 Priority Issues
- 07 Church Social Action & Barriers
- 10 Church Collaboration & Barriers
- 13 City Partner Collaboration & Barriers
- 15 Opportunities to Overcome Barriers
- 18 Recommendations



# Introduction & Methodology

The last few years has seen a step-change in collective church engagement in strategic city-wide issues in Bristol. This has been driven partly by the leadership of Mayor Marvin Rees, and partly by the vision and leadership of key Christian leaders in the city, given momentum and coherence through the banner of 'Building Bristol as a City of Hope'. With Marvin's time as Mayor due to end in 2024, and with the Covid context having created a renewed impetus for city-wide action on social issues, there is a unique window of opportunity in the next 2-3 years for church engagement in Bristol to expand and evolve even further.

In order to support this, the Good Faith Partnership has undertaken a short piece of scoping research, listening to the views of church and city leaders on this topic in order to ensure that any co-ordinated efforts can be built with broad ownership and buy-in from across the city.

The key questions which have guided this research are:

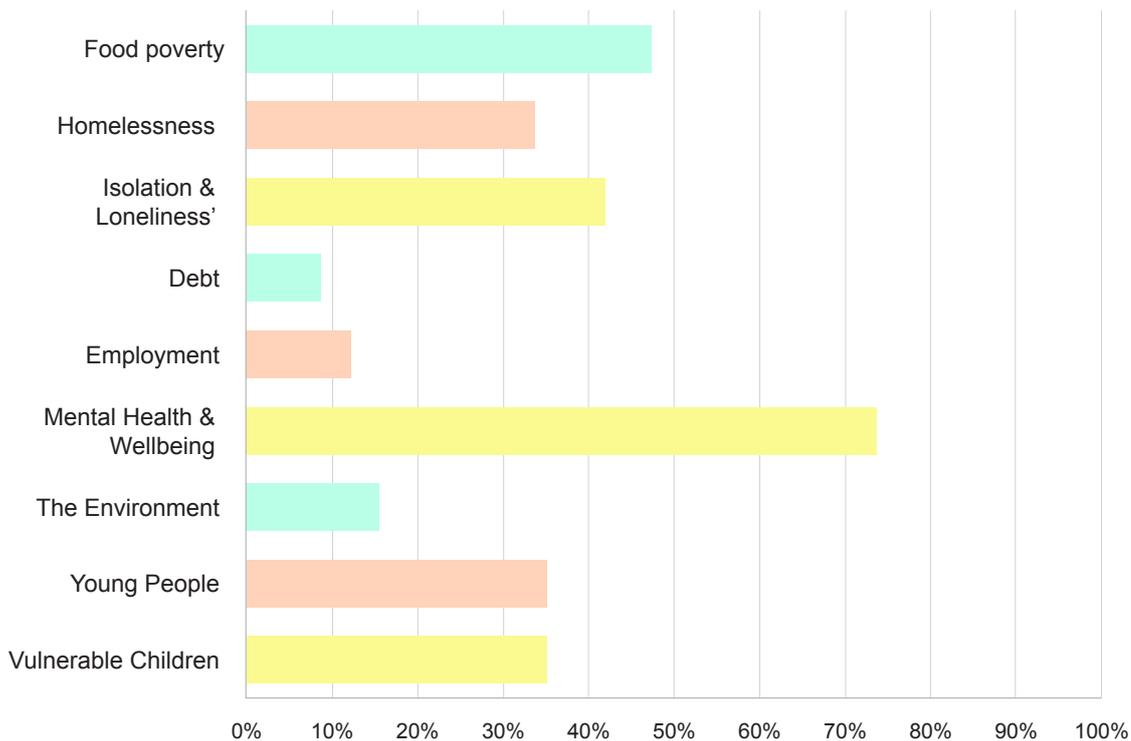
- How well do churches currently engage with social action in their community? Do they have the appetite to do more and if so what are the barriers that prevent this?
- How well do churches work in partnership with other churches on social action? Do they have an appetite to do more ecumenical social action work and if so what are the barriers that prevent this?
- How well do churches engage with 'City Partners' or organisations? Do they have the appetite to do more in partnership with secular organisations and if so what are the barriers that prevent this?

An online survey based on these questions was circulated to church leaders during October and November 2021, and received 31 responses. We also undertook 17 semi-structured interviews with church and city leaders, with interviewees chosen to give a broadly representative view in terms of geography, size of church, denomination, ethnicity etc. We are extremely grateful to all who took part and contributed their thoughts and experiences.

# Priority Issues

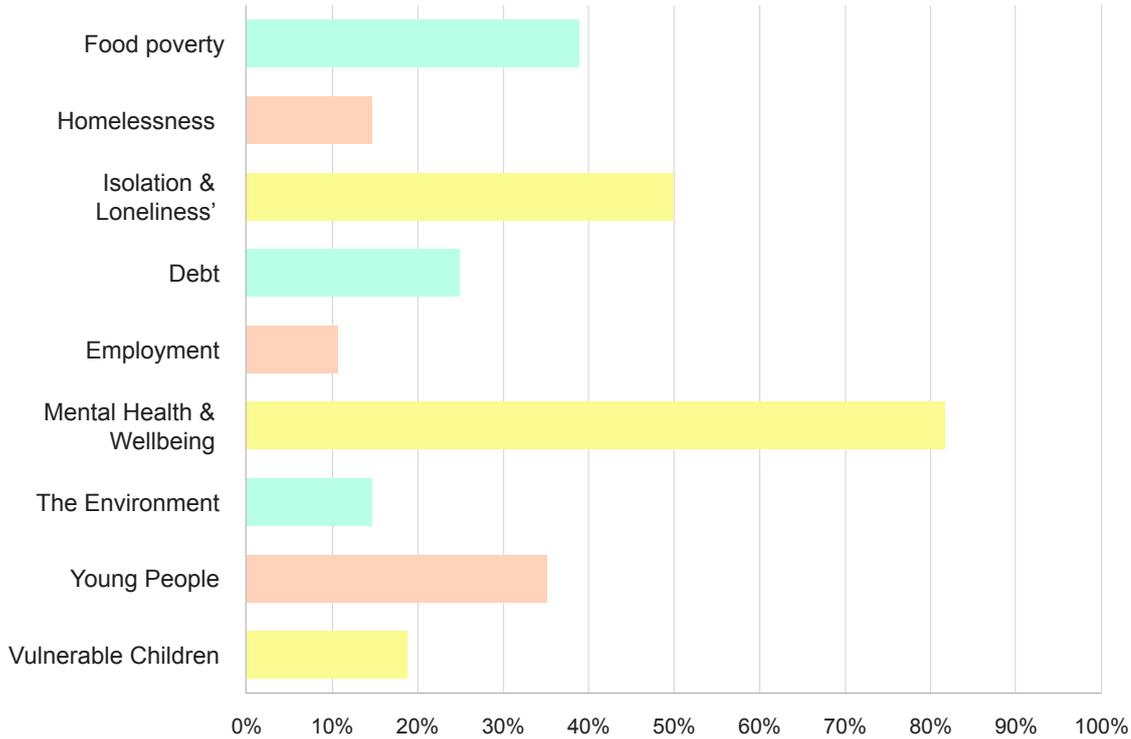
Our survey asked church leaders to identify what they thought were the key issues in terms of Covid recovery in Bristol. Mental Health was the top priority (70%), followed by Food Poverty (50%) and Isolation & Loneliness (42%). It is also noticeable that issues related to young people and vulnerable children combined would be the second highest priority. Answers for “other priorities” included addiction, family breakdown and affordable housing. Interestingly, these priorities for recovery post Covid mirror the top priorities in the recent **national ChurchWorks survey** and report, suggesting that the situation in Bristol is largely reflective of that facing cities and communities across the country.

## Q12 What do you consider are the priorities in terms of Covid recovery city-wide in Bristol? (Choose a maximum of three)



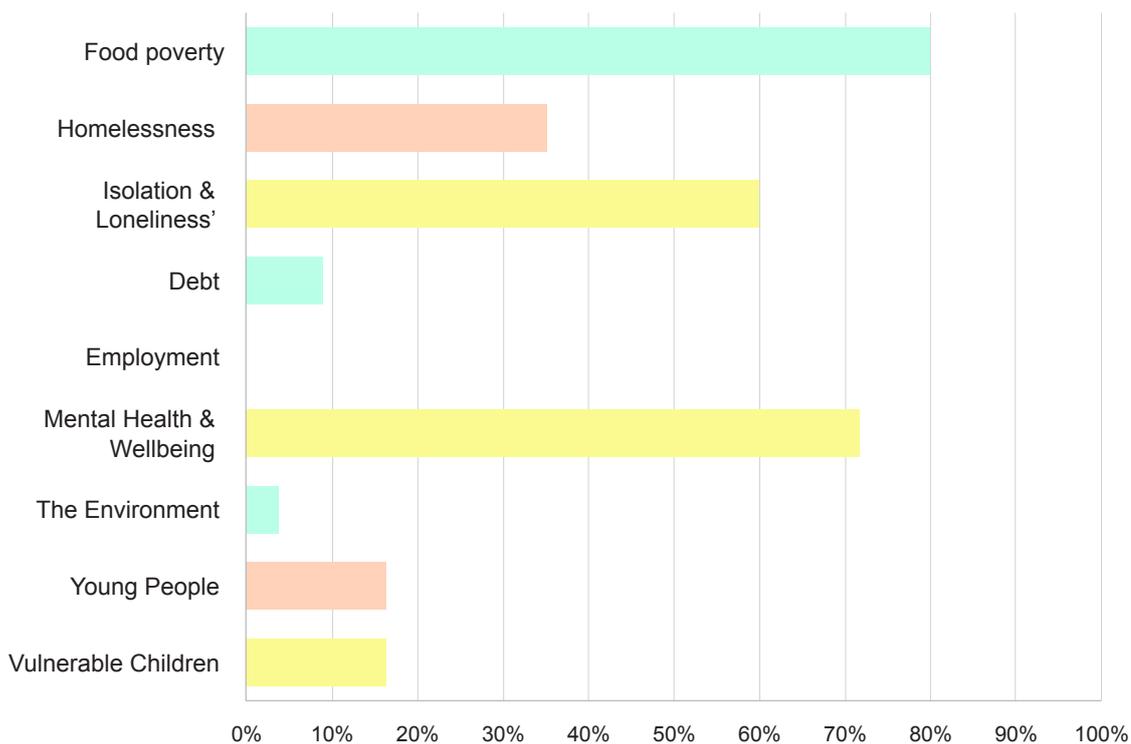
When considering the priorities for respondents' own local communities, Mental Health increased to 81% as the top priority, followed by Isolation & Loneliness (50%) and Food Poverty (39%).

**Q13 What do you consider are the priorities in terms of Covid recovery for your local community? Choose up to three.**



The survey also asked church leaders to identify the top three issues on which churches are best placed to make a difference. Once again mental health and social isolation featured prominently, along with a notable rise in the proportion of people identifying food poverty as a key theme.

**Q14 Which issues do you think churches in Bristol are best placed to make a difference on? Choose up to three.**



It is perhaps worth reflecting on the role that previous and current efforts play in shaping the imagination of church leaders on future themes and priorities. For example, it could be that recent high-profile church efforts on food poverty make church leaders more inclined to think of that issue as one that churches are well placed to engage in. The fact that no survey respondents chose employment as an issue that churches are well placed to act on is interesting in light of the new Spear Centre opening up at Christ Church Clifton, and suggests that there may be work to do to demonstrate the potential of churches to make a difference here. There is also a noticeable gap between people's perceptions of issues related to young people and their sense of the churches' ability to impact on this.



# Church Social Action & Barriers

Those surveyed and interviewed for this research were keen to praise the extraordinary efforts of church volunteers, who have given generously of their time, energy and money during these last 2 years in particular. Many churches have extended their existing social action efforts whilst also taking on new initiatives, driven by the need and demand as it presented itself. Many churches have commented on being stretched and challenged, but also enjoying being so hands-on with members of the community.

***“It’s been a pleasure and privilege to set up an emergency food bank to serve the city at this time. So many people have helped out, including those from other churches and those of no faith.”***

***“Our people have been so generous with their money, it’s been so inspiring to see them be so willing to give to help others”***

***“When I was delivering food parcels to people in the flats, they were quite surprised to see their vicar turn up with the delivery, wearing jeans and a t-shirt. It’s been good to do some myth-busting!”***

All survey respondents’ churches were engaged in social action to some extent and one third say they are “very engaged” with social action within Bristol. **94% of respondents would be keen for their church to engage even more than they currently do, which suggests a strong desire on the part of church leaders across Bristol for the Church to play a significant role in Covid recovery in the city.**

However, there were a number of key barriers identified by participants, and particularly the following:

**Busyness**

**Priorities**

**Compassion Fatigue**

**Locality**

## **Busyness of Church Members**

Respondents have observed that many people are choosing not to return to previous levels of commitment within their church communities. This is often seen with families taking on extra work to help out with their personal finances, meeting up with friends and families to make up for lost occasions during lockdowns as well as additional caring responsibilities with family members.

***“Capacity of members has reduced - people are choosing to do less following periods where slowing down has been enforced.”***

***“Many of our people are involved with “social action” in their jobs - teachers, police, school governors, doctors and nurses etc. Whilst caring for their own families and having a full-on job, they have little extra time or energy for Church-based social action activity”***

***“The biggest enemy to engagement is the busyness of our people”***

## **Prioritising Away from (own) Church Attendance**

Most church leaders said that many of their people have held back from returning to church at the level they attended prior to Covid. Many leaders have had members decide to move on to other churches, often to a more local setting, and people are choosing to stay away from in-person gatherings, making the most of live streaming options previously unavailable. Additionally, people have re-examined their need to attend church meetings, having had months away and needing to make their faith work without Sunday services.

***“Our congregation levels are not as they were pre-covid, and I don’t expect them to return soon. Sadly, people are out of the habit of going to church on a Sunday”***

***“Our members are elderly and have been nervous about returning, and our younger members are visiting friends and family that they haven’t been able to see during the various lockdowns”***

***“Some people are preferring to watch online talks and connect with God outside of the Church - they’ve been forced into it through churches closing, and have not returned to their pre-covid habits of church attendance”***

## Compassion Fatigue

A significant number of church leaders have commented that their congregations are suffering from compassion fatigue, having given so much of themselves to family, local community and to their church's social action initiatives during the Covid crisis. They have seen a reluctance to sign up for teams at church, and this in turn is stretching those who are on existing teams.

***“We get negative feedback that we do too much social action and community engagement.”***

***“We find that we simply don't have enough people on the ground, especially those who catch that kingdom vision”***

***“We sadly see an increased lack of passion and willingness to engage with social action”***

## Lack of a Local Parish

Several larger, city centre churches have mentioned their lack of an obvious local parish as they gather people from around the city. With church members being spread across the city, it is hard to make things happen either in a local context, or in that central context.

***“There has been a culture at our church for many years of “everyone does what they see fit in their own eyes”, as we don't have an obvious patch. This has led to many being engaged in social issues throughout the city but there has been a lack of collective engagement or vision for things being done by us as a church.”***

***“Our church isn't in an area of obvious need or societal change”***

***“Many churches are no longer parish churches so we need to find ways for people to volunteer in a local church in their local community. This creates more of a community locally, and you'll probably find people near to you that you didn't realise share your faith.”***

# Church Collaboration & Barriers

Church leaders have described much improved and deeper relationships as well as a greater collaborative spirit across the city's churches in recent times, which has often occurred as a result of "pulling together" on city-wide needs. Meetings for leaders and prayer gatherings have helped to galvanise much of this as it has enabled leaders to be easily involved, particularly as online meetings enable greater flexibility to attend.

Leaders have also commented on how well some smaller, local areas connect with each other, whether that's within the Anglican chapters, clergy prayer and Bible studies or pastors getting together to build depth in relationships and collaboration.

Interestingly, our survey suggests that there is a strong appetite to increase this collaboration between churches further. One third of respondents currently partner regularly with other churches and 83% would like to collaborate further with Bristol churches.

***"Leaders seem more willing to put aside any theological differ[ences] to come together to work for the good of the city"***

***"We have been able to rent buildings from Methodist churches to enable church plants, as well as work in partnership with the Baptists to collaborate on initiatives. It's really great"***

***"We've loved partnering with another church in our denomination on a new food bank. It's really brought us together in a way that we simply hadn't considered working before."***

***"It's been great setting up Transforming Lives for Good with two other churches, one of whom we'd had little contact with before"***

There are lots of positive stories of churches working together particularly during the last 18 months of the pandemic, but, naturally, there are also barriers to successful collaboration, which fall into five main areas:

**Sustainability    Ownership    Awareness    Independence    Theology**

## Sustainability

Church leaders have commented that too many projects and collaboration have been short-lived; a temporary burst of energy rather than the long-term, sustained efforts required to make meaningful change.

***“We need to develop a church-wide, commonly-owned strategy for serving the city rather than leaving it to chance and people doing things off their own backs. This culture will take time to develop and realise”***

***“It was a great project brought into our area of the city, but it felt like people were airlifted in, and then quite rapidly airlifted out. We need long term commitment of resource and money to make a lasting impact”***

***“Partnership where it is needed is brilliant. But working together just to prove that we can be united as Bristol churches seems pointless and can lead to duplication”***

## Ownership

Leaders of smaller churches have highlighted the tension of working with larger churches, who are contributing most of the resource, through finance, people and energy. It results in them feeling like they cannot fairly have ownership of the project in the same way as the church who is contributing so much.

***“We were in discussions with a church but it was made clear that we could work together on their things, in their way, within our community. It didn’t feel like much of a partnership and so didn’t get off the ground”***

***“We just felt it was a very unequal partnership - we had so little to offer the other church who was being so generous to us”***

***“We know our community really well but our voice wasn’t heard in the discussions about our area”***

## Awareness

Some respondents said that they are unaware of how to get involved with planned or existing social action, either centrally or locally. Whereas some leaders have good connections with other churches and are made aware of intentions with projects, other churches are not in the communication loop and unable to be involved from the start.

***“If we knew there were projects being thought through, we’d love to see if we could get involved, especially if it were nearby or at a very early stage of planning”***

***“It would be so great if there was a way of thoroughly mapping what was going on within various parts of the city so that churches could join in, seek expertise, and just generally be aware of what good is going on”***

## Independence

Some respondents have mentioned that other churches choose to focus on “doing their own thing”, rather than proactively working with other churches. Others have also questioned the need to partner with other churches - they would prefer their own people being involved with their vision for the church, and how they work that out in their own community and locality.

***“Church leaders are often bottlenecks. They may not want their members to commit to things which distract them from their own agendas and vision”***

***“We would simply prefer people to be involved with what God has put on our hearts, especially when it’s such a strong vision and requires all hands on deck with volunteers of time and money and resource”***

## Theology

There seems to be a range of views on the theology of social action within the city. Some churches feel that it is important to keep social action and evangelism distinct, whilst others believe that social action without direct evangelism is meaningless. Some church leaders see their role as helping their congregation get out into the community, whilst others prefer to focus on getting people from the community into their church. These differing views on the theological rationale for justice and mercy ministries can make collaboration between churches difficult.

***“Our DNA is very different, how we speak is different, how we approach social action is different. It’s easier to work with others with whom we think similarly”***

***“I’d love to help them understand the reason why it is a gospel imperative and not a nice-to-have addition alongside the worship and fellowship. But too often, this is what we come up against when trying to collaborate with some churches”***

# City Partner Collaborations

There is a general consensus amongst interviewees and survey respondents that church partnerships with secular organisations, or City Partners, has come a long way in a short time. This is particularly the case with regard to the Local Authority, where significant levels of trust and respect have been built between church leaders, politicians and officers. Several interviewees pointed to the role of the Mayor Marvin Rees in inspiring and facilitating this collaboration.

Church leaders are keen to partner further with city partners, and see Bristol churches play a leading role in the post-Covid recovery. 50% of church leaders who responded to our survey currently partner with secular organisations at a good or great level of collaboration, and 93% of respondents would like to collaborate more with City Partners.

This enthusiasm is replicated from those we spoke to who work in the Council. They felt there is a growing recognition in the city of the positive role and impact that churches can have in serving communities, and that there should be continued efforts to build partnership between churches and city institutions on Covid recovery issues. Key evidence that is now regularly cited in support of this is the way that churches responded collectively to the need for emergency foster carers during the pandemic.

## “Home for Good Case Study”

With the start of lockdown in March 2020, James Beardall from Bristol City Council contacted Clare Walker of Home for Good to see if Bristol churches might be able to assist with the need for more emergency foster carers. There were concerns that there would be a reduction in numbers able to care (due to the high proportion of carers over the age of 65) and an increase in the numbers of children needing emergency care (due to the impact of lockdown on families already in crisis). It was a key moment for Home for Good, who had spent many years building strong relationships with the Council. Through a concerted effort to spread the word across church leaders in the city, Home for Good were able to make 23 referrals to Bristol City Council for foster carers. As well as providing temporary placements, many who were approved as emergency foster carers subsequently went on to mainstream fostering.

***“We have been thrilled to see how many of our families have stepped up to respond to the fostering needs within Bristol. We have four families who have fostered, including two looking after unaccompanied asylum seeking children, as well as one family who have adopted a little girl. Our church family have come around them to support them as they stepped into caring for vulnerable children”***

Churches have enjoyed and welcomed the opportunities to work more closely with City Partners and organisations during the Covid pandemic, but there are also barriers to successful collaboration, which fall into three main areas:

## **Cost**

## **Motivations**

### **Associated Costs**

A common highlighted concern was the cost of working with certain franchises (CAP, TLG), which enable collaboration but incur monthly costs which small churches often cannot afford. Also, opportunities often have a high bar for participation, needing people, skills, expertise and time which can be a challenge for churches at the best of times, but even more so following the Covid pandemic and lockdowns.

***“We looked into a CAP Debt Centre for a while, but the costs were so high that we could not do it on our own. It’s a great charity but not viable for a small church to pay such high monthly costs”***

### **Differing Motivations**

Some respondents expressed the clash of culture when coming from a faith organisation compared to working with secular individuals or partners. Whilst there has been a very positive shift towards welcoming faith groups’ involvement, there is still a frequent perception encountered by leaders that people of faith are perceived to be motivated by proselytism. Leaders also find it challenging to progress when there seems to be political motivations and manoeuvrings at play.

***“Can be frustrating working with very large organisations whose value systems may vary from those of the Church”***

***“I lack confidence to reach out and connect with secular institutions which might be wary of church involvement.”***

# Opportunities to Overcome Barriers

As well as identifying common barriers, we asked interviewees to think about potential opportunities to overcome these and to further unlock the potential for collaborative church social action in Bristol. These opportunities were clustered in five themes.

**Inspiration    Direction    Sharing    Succession & Inclusion    The role of the Cathedral**

## Inspiration

The role of storytelling has been one of the most common themes to emerge from the surveys and research. Not only do stories inspire and encourage people to deepen their engagement with social action, they also reinforce the variety of projects and initiatives that are taking place. Stories remind leaders and church members of the vitality of their faith and that whilst there is so much still to be done, there is also a lot of good taking place. Telling stories could also act as fuel for those not currently engaging much with social action.

***“Some good resources / short films that tell stories of the need and of the difference individuals and churches can make”***

***“Let’s tell the good news stories more and share the reasons why we do this”***

***“Sharing the success stories as well as where it hasn’t gone to plan”***

***“Relationship is the biggest factor in getting someone engaged with anything. If you have someone who is a champion for a cause in your church, they will naturally win over other people to that cause”***

## Direction

Church leaders have asked for help in understanding how they can best support the mission of the Council for the City. There are many projects, structures and initiatives that churches could be involved with, so having direction as to the areas of greatest need or the areas where there is little provision would help churches understand where they could use their precious time, money and volunteers. Smaller churches have also expressed a desire to start small, enabling limited resources initially but with the ability to increase as their capacity grows. Additionally, City-wide priorities strike home more with congregations and individuals when they see there’s a collective effort to make a difference in a few, specific areas of life within Bristol.

***“Direction in where and how to start small”***

***“Strong well coordinated initiatives which are easy for busy local churches to access”***

***“Streamline, make it simple and straightforward with easy points of entry and access for referring congregants to get involved”***

***“Focus on fewer things. Focusing on a few things would likely aid engagement”***

***“One or two things a year to focus on as “Churches Together” in Bristol to make it simpler and obvious”***

## **Sharing - Knowledge & Resource**

There is a clear desire for leaders to have better knowledge and understanding in regards to social action work. Practical help would be highly beneficial, advice in how to fund roles and projects; knowledge-sharing surrounding the success and the pitfalls of particular programmes of work.

Small churches have expressed joy at the generosity of bigger churches willing to share their people, time and money to enable work at a local level. Similarly, churches without a parish and wishing to make a difference in an area appreciate being able to use church buildings and work with local volunteers.

***“We’d love to know more about grant-making and fund-raising, maybe through some workshops and advice”***

***“Project mapping across the city to give greater visibility, and particularly within areas when new initiatives are launched”***

***“Ensure secure, long term budgets for organisations delivering services so that they can plan well for years ahead”***

## **Sharing - Mentoring/Twinning**

Respondents have shared their desire to work more closely with other churches, both from big, central churches and smaller, more local churches. Churches have expressed their delight at working with each other and churches who are running successful initiatives have willingly offered to teach and train others in how to make projects a reality.

***“Encourage and increase partnership between central, bigger and wealthier churches to more deprived congregations further out”***

***“Prioritise area collaborations before citywide - relationships will be more easily established if in a similar patch of the city”***

***“Greater friendship and relationship between churches, and within areas of Bristol as well as across the City.”***

## **Succession & Inclusion Planning**

Leaders are highly complimentary of those who have been taking the lead in pulling people, churches, organizations and resources together to raise awareness of need and catalyze momentum and enthusiasm.

Several mentioned the need to share the load of this, with comments that it should be driven more by church leaders. However, leaders concede they have little extra capacity with the increased demands of leading a church. There’s also been a desire to involve younger leaders within the city - those attending city-wide meetings and gatherings tend to be over the age of 40 - as well as involving more women in the high profile roles.

***“Where are all the young leaders? Who can we get involved at a city-wide level to start building their experience of this cross-church collaboration?”***

***“Greater variety on screens at meetings - with age, gender and ethnicity”***

***“It would be really great to include other faith groups, and people of no faith, into the social action activities we do. It could make our churches increasingly inclusive and welcoming, as well as preventing unnecessary duplication”***

***“The team do a great job, and it would be great if they could expand to do more, and by including others in that team, make it a truly diverse steering committee”***

## **The Role of the Cathedral**

Those we spoke to connected to Bristol Cathedral highlighted a potential shift in the culture and outlook of both the Cathedral and the Diocese towards more civic engagement. One expression of this is a bid to the Church of England Commissioners for resource to strengthen Anglican social action in the most deprived communities in Bristol. Another is the Cathedral’s engagement on racial justice issues, including hosting the Church of England’s Racial Justice Commission meeting in January 2022. Given the Cathedral’s physical presence at the heart of the city and adjacent to City Hall, there is a sense from this research process of a potential opportunity for it to play a greater leadership role in both convening and catalysing strategic church-city conversations and action. If done well, this could help to broaden the leadership base of these efforts whilst also creating new opportunities to engage churches which might have thus far been on the margins of the ‘City of Hope’ conversation.

# Recommendations

## A City-Wide Event

We believe that this scoping research demonstrates a desire on the part of both churches and city partners to strengthen and deepen church engagement in social action, particularly as Bristol looks to recover from the pandemic. Our key recommendation is an in-person event, to be held in early-mid 2022, focused on the Church's role in Covid Recovery in Bristol. We would recommend that this event should include:

- **Connection Time with God and Others:** Leaders have mentioned their desire to be together, particularly since Covid has reduced large gatherings. Many leaders have not been in a room together for a long time, and whilst using technology has been useful, it is not the same as face to face conversations. They've discussed the importance of any whole church event needing to allow time and space for reconnection and new introductions. Relationship building time is a key component of any time together, particularly in the context of sharing on social action activity and enabling potential partnership opportunities. There's also a strong desire for times of worship and prayer.
- **Influencing Discussions:** Discussion times would also be welcomed, especially if feedback was proactively encouraged. Church leaders are often incredibly busy, but want to feel like they are getting to have a tangible and obvious impact from discussion groups.
- **Purpose:** They have also highlighted the need for a clear aim in any meeting: it would be good to understand in advance if it is purely for Church leaders and those of faith to connect with each other, or including secular partners if the aim is about increasing awareness of potential collaboration. Additionally, it would be good to include a range of people, particularly people who are proven within social action projects, but may differ from the usual faces presented at meetings. It would also be welcomed to see a diverse team of people planning and presenting the event.
- **Project Mapping:** A project mapping exercise would also be useful, enabling churches in Bristol to see quickly who is involved with which types of projects within the city. This could encourage greater levels of collaboration between churches and areas as well as avoiding duplication of projects. With many churches drawing people in from across the city, and even Somerset and Bath, project mapping would enable volunteers to make a difference in their own community, through projects of other churches. It could also enable several projects to team up on specific days in the week or month.

- **City Partner Involvement:** It would be great to hear from City Partners and organisations, perhaps in a separate, distinct section and have the opportunity to show them the heart that leaders have for the City of Bristol and for being a force for good within the city. It's important that it's a two way street: City Partners being able to share about need and desire for the Church's help, the Church can express their motives, ability and capacity to help in response.

## Collaborative Models for Church Social Action

Some of the greatest successes in this area have come about through organisations which work with and through churches, and particularly where these organisations have models of engagement which enable and encourage collaboration. For example, the CAP Centre in South Bristol was raised by multiple interviewees as an example of best practice for the way it helps churches work together across the area. In particular it was noted that smaller churches in more deprived communities were able to bring things to the project (such as client referrals and volunteers with lived experience) which were just as valuable as the resources brought by larger churches in more affluent communities.

We would therefore strongly encourage Christian social action organisations to consider how their models of practice can equip and encourage churches to collaborate more effectively with each other and with secular City Partners.

## Sharing of Stories

As mentioned before, the role of storytelling has been one of the most common themes to emerge from the surveys and research. Stories could be collected and shared more widely, through a website, social media channels, churches and with City Partners. Short videos highlighting the role that churches are playing on social action in the City are felt to be particularly effective, as they can be used within church services but also shared on social media and more widely across the city.

## Leadership Development

The significant progress that has been made in coordinating individuals, churches, organisations and City Partners has been largely due to a small number of gifted and passionate individuals. There is much appreciation for their hard work and dedication to making things happen as well as improving communication between churches and between the Church and City Partners.

The next phase of evolution will need to include a more dispersed set of leaders, who can be developed, mentored, coached and trained to operate at the intersection of church leaders and City Partners. This can be achieved through intentionally structuring events, both online meetings and in person gatherings to push these upcoming leaders to the forefront of people's minds, enabling them to be associated with the next phase of leaders.

There could also be a more formal leadership development process for young leaders, developing and growing their leadership skills whilst linking church social action to the strategic priorities of the One City Plan. This would enable greater levels of projects, initiatives and collaboration to be accomplished, through a wider and more diverse team as well as enabling succession planning and raising up new and younger leaders. Such a programme could be modelled on efforts such as the **Buxton Leadership Programme** which are seeking to support Christians to engage well in public life.



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