FAITH IN ACTION

A REPORT ON FAITH COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL
IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND

FOR THE EAST OF ENGLAND FAITHS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

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Foreword

The research and conclusions summarised in this document are truly inspirational, showing the enormous number of ways in which the work of faith communities is making a vital contribution to the fabric of society in our region.

Many of the apparently small things that make the world a better place to be – a helping hand when it is needed; something new and interesting to learn about; recognition, respect and understanding – are rarely given to us by the famous or powerful. They are gifts from 'ordinary' people acting in extraordinary ways, people through whom our God works with love.

It is therefore with pleasure that we present this report, and express our hope that it will inspire and encourage faith communities, and will demonstrate the value of these groups to the wider world.
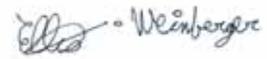
Finally, we wish to thank all those involved in its production: the East of England Development Agency and Government Office for the East of England for their financial support and commitment to the project; the research team; and most of all, those people of faith who co-operated to provide such a wealth of information.
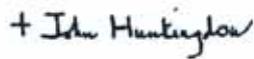
John Flack	Zia-ul Hassan	Ellis Weinberger
Bishop of Huntingdon	Peterborough Inter-Faith Council	Jewish Reform Synagogue

Co-Chairs of the East of England Faiths Leadership Conference

The East of England Faiths Leadership Conference was established in early 2002 to bring together the leaders of the main faiths in the East of England such that they could speak with a common voice to bodies engaged on regional governance; and seek appropriate input and representation on such bodies.

Summary

This report is the result of a survey of twelve faith groups in the East of England that took place during the autumn and winter 2002–2003.

The range of groups included representatives of each of the five faiths currently involved in the Government's Inner Cities Religious Council: Christianity; Hinduism; Islam; Judaism and Sikhism.

While acknowledging that the primary function of these groups was a spiritual one, we looked at the social impact of their activities. Our purpose was to discover what social activities the groups were involved in organising and how these might enhance the social capital both of their members and the community in which they were embedded.

Social capital is defined here as the social engagement that gives people access to support, opportunities and information which further enables them to pursue their own goals and help them to achieve well-being. It fosters trust and builds a community's capacity to further organise and prosper. It is seen by the Government as central to its Neighbourhood Renewal policy.

Faith groups have a long history of working with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society, including some that statutory bodies have found it difficult to reach. This study demonstrates that faith groups are particularly skilled at identifying the needs of their communities as well as finding practical and often innovative ways of fulfilling them.

The services we found ranged from the provision of health advice and English lessons as part of the regular activities of a lunch club for the elderly, to the involvement of young people in the removal of graffiti, cleaning and landscaping communal areas.

We also identify areas where this provision could be enhanced:

- Simplifying the procedures involved in funding applications for small projects would enable applicants, who are largely volunteers, to concentrate more efforts on service provision than fundraising.

- Potential funding bodies need to develop awareness of the specialised knowledge faith groups have of their communities' needs. It is also important for them to understand that the benefits accrued through activities centred on faith groups are shared by the communities in which they are embedded and not just by group members.

- Faith communities need to develop skills in communicating these facts. The ability to describe activities and aspirations in ways that members of potential funding bodies or partner organisations can understand and value would improve success rates and help to avoid frustration and exhaustion.

- In small faith communities the organisation of service provision often falls to a few very active individuals. It is therefore extremely vulnerable when these individuals are ill or absent for some other reason. Forging partnerships with other faith groups, charities or Local Authorities can help to maintain continuity of provision.

- Partnerships also make a wider variety of services viable and enable the sharing of training, premises and management costs.

This study indicates that faith groups provide an impressive range of valuable services and benefits to their local communities. With some more systematic thought and co-operation building on best practice, it may be possible for them to achieve even more.

Introduction

1.1 Aims

The central aim of this research is to assess the social, cultural and economic impact that faith communities have on their constituents, and the communities in which they are based. It uses Luton and Peterborough as case study sites to develop a model of how these issues can be approached and indicate the type of contributions being made.

1.2 Objectives

The aims of the study are achieved through a number of operational objectives:

i   A review of the existing literature on the social, economic and cultural impact of faith communities to help develop a formal typology of the range of their activities.

ii   The holding of semi-structured interviews with key members of different faith communities in our two study sites to explore the actual scope and levels of activity within the two local contexts.

iii   The writing of a report of our findings, providing indication of impact, and quantification where possible.

iv   The provision of feedback to participants and policymakers.

1.3 Assumptions

The research was underpinned by some important initial assumptions.

First, we assumed that the primary function of all faith groups is spiritual.

Second, we expected that each faith community would place different emphases on different activities. For example, some have explicit social agendas, while others do not. Both positions are accepted as equally valid.

We further assumed that where data were not available, this reflected a lack of data, not necessarily a lack of activity.

It is also recognised that there are likely to be 'positive externalities', that is faith groups can have a positive effect on their wider communities without always being fully aware of this aspect of their role.

1.4 Methods and Data Sources

1.4.1 Study Sites

Because of the multi-faith focus of this study, we used two sites for initial investigation. Peterborough and Luton were chosen as being among the most culturally and ethnically diverse communities in the East of England.

Whilst minority ethnic communities in the region are relatively low level (4 per cent of the population), Luton City Council estimates nearly one-quarter of its population belong to an ethnic group other than 'white' (20 per cent in 1991); and Peterborough just over 7 per cent.

We included groups from two geographical areas because we anticipated that there might be some local conditions that influence the relationships between the faith groups, their constituents and their communities. It was therefore considered valuable to use data from two distinct areas, in order to provide a more balanced picture than could be drawn from a single case study.

1.4.2 Faith Group Contacts

We conducted semi-structured interviews with faith representatives identified by members of the local councils of faith in each area. Whilst this method of case selection was undoubtedly a potential source of bias, there were several practical benefits that countered this.

First, timetabling was very tight; originally three months were allowed from set-up to completion. This did not allow us time to identify and survey all faith groups, nor to spend a lot of time negotiating access with busy or wary respondents.

Also, we were aware that there could be language problems. All the active researchers were English speakers whereas potential respondents might not be.

Our aim was to get a sense of the input faith communities make in the Eastern Region, and this was achieved. The interviews provide us with useful insights into the potential role of faith groups more generally, but should not be treated as fully representative findings.

Representatives of twelve faith groups were interviewed about the social activities of their groups. These included three Christian, two Hindu, three Islamic, one Jewish and three Sikh groups, the five faiths currently involved in the Government's Inner Cities Religious Council.

The interviews took place during the autumn and winter of 2002–2003, either at the place of worship, the home of the participants or at their business premises, whichever suited them best.

1.4.3 Interviews

Faith representatives were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. An interview schedule (see appendix 1) was developed on the basis of the wider literature and feedback from members of the East of England Faiths Leadership Conference.

The schedule covered the social and cultural aspects of the study, by specifying activities and services under four general sub-headings: health support services; social support services; educational services and community and leisure activities.

At the end of each section participants were asked if they could suggest any other activities that should be included, so as to provide us with as clear and inclusive a picture as possible. For the most part, respondents were not able to quantify levels of provision.

It was hoped to discover any areas in which faith groups had been particularly successful in identifying ways in which members were not able to access services through mainstream agencies, or how gaps in provision led to the culturally specific needs of group members not being filled. Some faith leaders considered this to be a potentially sensitive issue and inappropriate for us to discuss. It was therefore dealt with only cursorily.

Participants were asked whether any of their activities were particularly tailored to the social or doctrinal needs of the members of their faith group. Responses to this question were then examined in the context of the responses to other questions.

Another aim was to make some assessment of the contribution the faith groups made to the local economy. This was also perceived as a delicate subject and was therefore not dealt with in any depth. Respondents were asked if their group had a policy of buying services and goods locally. This provided a crude measure of their potential economic impact.

Finally, respondents were invited to offer any other ideas or comments. This open question was designed to give participants the opportunity to develop themes that they saw as particularly relevant and important and which might help to guide future studies.

1.4.4 Analysis and Reporting

In analysing and reporting the data social and cultural issues were treated together, because we found the two difficult to separate in practice.

In focusing mainly on the faith communities' contribution to social capital we describe activities being undertaken by the various groups under sub-headings derived from the literature review. These are: health support services; social support services; educational services and community and leisure activities; and briefly, doctrinal needs and any economic considerations.

We take a functional, rather than faith-based approach, consistent with our multi-faith focus. We report raw numbers rather than percentages because the numbers involved are small.

Finally, based on our analysis, we offer some tentative conclusions and recommendations.

1.5 Background

What is the impact of a faith group on the social, economic and cultural fabric of its community and constituents? Current policy assumes that it is positive. The Home Office, the Department of Health and the Office of Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (DETR 2000) are all funding projects related to faith communities. The ODPM places the role of faith communities centrally in the Urban White Paper 'Our Towns and Cities: the future', and gives hard-edged utilitarian reasons for the involvement of faith communities in regeneration.

They argue that faith communities possess: 'valuable resources and social capital in terms of networks, buildings, voluntary activity and leadership skills' and typically offer service provision to their community.

The phrase 'social capital' refers to how people are connected to each other, and the values that underpin those connections. Buildings are not social capital, but the activities that take place within them are because they connect people in some shared endeavour.

These ideas may be more familiar under other names; each of us knows the importance of being valued and cared for; and many of us equally value our ability to care, to empathise and to 'make a difference'. We are also familiar with how those around us provide us with access to information and resources we might not have available if we were on our own.

The recent interest of policy-makers in social capital is perhaps less concerned with the individual 'feel-good factor', than with more tangible positive social outcomes. Research has shown that communities with high levels of social capital often show higher economic growth, better educational outcomes, lower crime rates, better health, both mental and physical, and more effective governance (e.g. Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) 2002).

The ODPM considers the role of faith communities to be especially important in generating or supporting social capital in deprived areas where other social infrastructures may be absent. http://www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/community/faith/involve/index.htm

Furthermore, they argue that faith communities frequently have a membership that cuts across social divisions, and therefore helps to support and sustain social cohesion.

At the same time they argue that faith groups may also represent the only 'local organisation able to reflect the views of particular ethnic groups'. In the context of the findings that follow, it is worth noting that the ODPM also considers many faith groups to be unusually well resourced when compared with other voluntary associations, in terms of having paid staff, an active membership, access to funds from charitable trusts and members' donations, as well as a well defined legal constitutional framework and the ability to draw on the resources of national networks or institutions.

Whilst many faith communities may welcome a role in community development, others may not view themselves in quite these terms; a point which the White Paper concedes. It notes that 'This summary of resources may be at odds with the perceptions some faith organisations have of themselves, struggling to maintain buildings or fund activities'.

The ODPM also accepts that, in order to work in partnership with Government in community regeneration projects, many faith groups will need help to develop the management and monitoring skills required. The transparency and accountability required in the use of public funds means that their acceptance does incur a cost in time and effort on the part of partner organisations.

The White Paper does acknowledge that 'places of worship are good sources of contacts … and they have numerous links with the surrounding community'. However it fails to emphasise the importance of the 'soft' aspects of faith membership: friendship, belonging and support, the improved well being associated with them and the way these relationships can offer people a 'way in' to volunteering.

The overall level of involvement in voluntary work seems to have remained fairly stable since the 1980's, although there has been a slight fall over the last decade (see appendix 3). However the Institute for Volunteering Research has pointed out that people from ethnic minorities continue to face organisational, attitudinal and institutional barriers to volunteering.
`http://www.ivr.org/projects.htm`.

There is evidence that involvement with others in a faith group may help to overcome these barriers (for example see Putnam 2000: especially pp 65–133).

An important aspect of membership of a faith community is just that – membership. This can afford access to support, information and resources. While social capital is a term that has become particularly fashionable, it is not a new idea.

It was coined in the 1980s when both Pierre Bourdieu in France and J S Coleman in the United States used it in the field of educational sociology. Both describe how social networks can enhance life-chances and educational outcomes.

However, as early as the 19th century, the French Sociologist, Emile Durkheim, identified incidental social benefits engendered by membership of a faith community.

In his study of suicide he wrote: 'If religion protects man against the desire for self-destruction, it is not that it preaches the respect for his own person to him with arguments sui generis; but because it is a society … The more numerous and strong these collective states of mind are, the stronger the integration of the religious community and also the greater its preservation value' (Durkheim: 1951: pp 152–170).

Durkheim's findings were supported by a recent Australian study (Francis and Kalder 2002), which shows a correlation between regular church attendance and measures of personal psychological well-being. This may not be the primary purpose of faith groups, but it is a significant beneficial by-product of their activities.

This brings us to our main focus. There appears to have been little systematic study of the social and cultural impact of faith communities in Britain. The most comprehensive study of social capital in Britain (Hall 1999) makes no mention of religious organisations. Yet, Hall's study looks at the membership of voluntary organisations, charitable giving, and informal sociability, all of which are likely to be key activities within many faith communities.

In their recent review of social capital, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) did not come across any work that explores the association of religious faith and social capital in Britain (Harper, 2002, private communication). The recently published Social Capital: a discussion paper (PIU, 2002) by the Performance and Innovation Unit which looks explicitly at the role of policy and social capital, also neglects faith groups.

The Institute for Volunteering Research has begun to look at how faith groups affect patterns of volunteering and is planning to pursue this research (see Lukka and Locke: 2001 on
`http://www.ivr.org.uk/projects.htm`

Where we have been able to find evidence, it is generally positive. For example, recent research from the National Council pf Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and Centre for Civil Society, using the World Values Survey (WVS), finds that regular 'church' attendance predicts volunteering. A small-scale study of churches, undertaken by the East of England Churches Network (EECN: 2000), found churches to be very active in their local communities.

This was echoed in the 'Building on Faith' report that the Church Urban Fund published in 2002. This concluded that faith groups 'add value to community renewal' (Finneron and Dinham: 2000: p63) and describes them as being influential potential partners in Government projects for neighbourhood renewal.

A report by Voluntary Action Manchester (VAM) described churches there as 'contributing a high proportion of community action'. The Church Urban Fund report 'Flourishing Communities' not only agreed with this finding but also identified the need to support this work through building closer links with other faith groups and voluntary organisations (Musgrave: 1999). Evidence from elsewhere suggests that faith groups are central to healthy cohesive societies.

Considering the role of religion in the USA, Putnam (2000: p 66) writes: 'faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America'. They are conduits for volunteering, charitable-giving, social, cultural and service provision, including family centres, environmental groups and recreational clubs for example. They also provide opportunities to develop civic skills and address collective action problems.

Putnam argues that active faith groups can be good for everyone in their communities. They can help to build capacity for community involvement, and provide access to social support beyond that offered to their immediate membership.

It is important to note, however, that people in the US are generally far more engaged in organised religion than those in the UK. About 15 per cent of the population of England and Wales consider themselves to have 'no religion', while almost one per cent claimed, on the 2001 census, to be 'Jedi Knights'.
http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/commentaries/ethnicity.asp.

In the UK, of those who profess religious belief only 39 per cent attend religious service at least once a year (Social Trends 2001). This apparent lack of religious engagement may help explain why most research related to faith agencies and the public good has, thus far, been American (e.g. Silverman, 2002; and Smith and Sosin, 2001).

Our purpose here is to develop an understanding of what activities are currently being undertaken by different faith communities in the East of England, in addition to their spiritual missions. In order to impose practical limits on the research we focus on those activities reported by faith communities.

The findings presented are from all participating faith groups, and relate to health, social services, education, community and leisure activities. Whilst the issue of how these activities are enmeshed with the specific social and doctrinal needs of faith group members proved difficult for interviewees to engage with, we include those comments that were made.

In the conclusion that follows we consider some of the issues arising from our findings.

2. Findings

2.1 Health

[2.1.A/B] **Hospital visiting** and visiting the sick at home. Nine out of the twelve groups answered 'yes' to a direct question about engaging in hospital and home sick visiting. However two others later said that these activities would take place through the informal networks within the groups.

Whilst for some it was seen as part of the official role of the faith leader, or paid lay members to undertake the work involved, it was more generally seen as a social norm within the community. It was also pointed out that there is an explicit doctrinal duty placed on members to visit the sick by some religions.

One group also provided informal interpreting services to hospital patients and had plans to develop this aspect of their support.

[2.1.C] **Health Advice.** Four groups saw themselves as providing health advice although others also spoke of the unofficial supportive role played by a range of healthcare professionals within the group. These included: nurses, doctors, pharmacists and opticians. It seems that advice was often sought on an ad-hoc basis before professional consultations took place.

Those working with the elderly, families under pressure and the young were particularly aware that they might be called upon for health advice and felt the need to be able to access information on behalf of others.

Healthcare professionals and representatives of organisations such as Help the Aged were also among speakers invited to address lunch clubs.

[2.1.D] **Mental Health Support.** Four of the groups saw themselves as providing mental health support. Another informant expressed his group's aspiration to employ a professional counsellor.

One explained that their group had access to a national, faith-based mental health support charity which was able to provide counsellors and supportive accommodation when needed.

Another group provided same-gender counselling.

One informant stated that all members would support at need. It is interesting, given the evidence that links depression with social isolation, that this sort of informal supportive function of membership is not more explicit within the groups. Perhaps this is due to a generally held narrow understanding of the definition of mental illness and its stigmatised status.

One group which had its own extensive premises also provided an affordable venue for a number of self-help groups, including some for those with mental health problems and their carers, but this was not seen as a function of the faith group.

[2.1.E] **Transport for the Sick and Infirm.** Some groups (seven) had organised arrangements for the transport of the sick and infirm. This might include trips to services, meetings, legal and medical appointments, lunch clubs and outings.

However all but one of the other groups reported informal help being provided at need. The informant who reported no such help did discuss other frequent assistance offered to the elderly and infirm and talked about having incomplete knowledge of exactly what this support involved.

One group was preparing to bid for lottery funding to provide a minibus for this purpose.

[2.1.F] **Other.** Some groups reported additional activities related to health support. For example, one participant also reported group visits by members to donate blood. They hoped that, by building a critical mass of donors, they would enable the Blood Transfusion Service to use their centre to hold formal sessions that would be more accessible to the local community. This group had also raised funds to buy equipment for the special care baby unit at the local hospital.

Another was involved in discussions with a local hospital about broadening the institution of hospital chaplaincy to include other religions.

We would add that many sporting and keep-fit activities of the faith groups also have health implications, as do the lunch clubs and shared meals.

2.2 Social Support

[2.2.A] **Housing Advice.** Five respondents reported the provision of housing advice directly, with a sixth organising advice surgeries with an outside agency. However, once again, others reported informal advice networks and people with housing problems being directed to the appropriate agencies by group members.

[2.2.B] **Homelessness Services.** Four groups provided services for the homeless. A day centre that had been founded by members of one of the faith groups interviewed had grown to involve members of a number of other groups in the region.

One was extremely active in this field, with members helping out at the day-centre and at a night shelter as well as a project particularly aimed at reaching young homeless people. They also owned 32 warden-controlled flats with mainly elderly residents.

Another held a communally owned property that provided social housing not only for members of their own faith community but also for others in need.

A fourth group had access to field workers from a national faith-based organisation that they could refer members to at need.

A fifth, though not involved in these activities at the time of the interview, was negotiating with a local night-shelter project about providing food.

Another group reported that they had previously been involved in running a soup-kitchen for the city's homeless but that there had been a difficulty maintaining staffing levels and it was currently suspended.

A number of informants saw the role of the faith community as providing a social support network for individuals and families that could prevent homelessness. One informant went so far as to say 'No one would be allowed to become homeless in our community!' But they did later add that the group's premises could be used for short periods (one or two days) to house those in need of sanctuary while other help was sought.

[2.2.C] **Support for Independent Community Living by Disabled People.** Two groups reported support for the independent living of disabled people, although almost all had also reported providing help with transport for those with mobility problems and one spoke of 'large numbers of people … giving a lot of time to helping each other, particularly with regard to visiting and helping the sick and the elderly'.

One also held training courses aimed at providing carers with health and safety advice as well as skills and information to help them in their support role.

[2.2.D] **Benefits/Financial Advice.** Six groups reported providing benefits/financial advice, whilst a seventh, who answered no to this question, later reported providing debt counselling.

One held surgeries with representatives from outside agencies while another had members who worked in the field and were happy to advise other group members if approached. Some lunch clubs and discussion groups also invited outside speakers who were able to offer help and advice.

[2.2.E] **Financial Services.** Only one of the groups in this study was engaged in any organised financial service. This was a well-established credit union that had been running for two years.

The other group to answer 'yes' to this question was referring to debt counselling services that were dealt with in 2.2.d.

However another group, who answered 'no' to this question, reported that members informally facilitated interest-free loans. This was needed because of a doctrinal ban on the charging or payment of interest on loans. This is a classic example of how social capital functions through groups and can compensate for costs of group membership.

[2.2.F] **Bereavement Counselling.** Eleven out of twelve respondents reported the provision of bereavement counselling. In most cultures religion is central to death and mourning rituals, so it is perhaps more surprising that one group did not report involvement in this field rather than that all the rest did. However, this respondent was particularly negative about their group's activities and initially answered 'no' to everything.

Other groups varied in the formality with which bereavement support was offered. Some had traditions that involved the whole community gathering en masse to support the bereaved family. In one group a committee was formed to whom care of grieving families was delegated, while for some other groups it was seen a part of the faith leader's duty of pastoral care.

Members of one group were involved in a project for children affected by bereavement or divorce as well as having links with a local hospice.

One minister interviewed was on the committee of CRUSE, the bereavement counselling organisation and two other groups also had close links with their local CRUSE.

[2.2.G] **Food Distribution.** Only four groups reported undertaking food distribution. Two divided the offerings from harvest festival and Christmas collections into food parcels that were distributed locally and another held communal meals.

A fourth collected food for distribution to people in need and was particularly involved in helping people awaiting asylum decisions and unable to access other support.

A fifth group was in the process of negotiating the supply of food to a local night-shelter.

All but one of the other groups also ran subsidised lunch clubs or held communal meals that were provided for by donations, but did not view this in terms of food distribution.

[2.2.H] **Advocacy.** Definition of the term 'advocacy' was deliberately left open. Three groups used it, one to describe their activities in visiting a local prison and others to refer to representation and help offered to those with problems involving legal, benefit and health services.

One group wanted to employ someone to take over their advice and advocacy service. This had previously been provided and coordinated by a leading group member on a voluntary basis. His death had made it difficult to maintain the services.

[2.2.I] **Community Liaison.** It is not surprising that most (11/12) groups reported themselves as active in the area of community liaison, given that participating groups were recruited from the local councils of faith. However the range of activities goes well beyond this.

They included dialogue with schools, the police, hospitals and prisons. The purpose of such liaison work was wide-ranging, from explaining the needs of group members to the active promotion of multi-ethnic recruitment policies by the police and armed forces.

One informant ascribed good community relations in Luton largely to the work of interfaith liaison taking place in the area. He was particularly enthusiastic about their annual 'Interfaith Pilgrimage', which arranges visits between different places of worship.

[2.2.J] **Citizenship Advice** We included a question on citizenship advice to look at whether there were any services aimed specifically at helping recent immigrants and people awaiting asylum decisions, a group identified by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as being particularly vulnerable and socially isolated.

http://www.jrf.org.uk/pressroom/releases/170902.asp

Some respondents felt this field to be too politically sensitive. However four groups did identify themselves as offering a number of support services.

These groups were all in the sample from Luton, probably due to the presence in the town of a hostel for people awaiting asylum decisions. One group had forged particularly close links with people staying at the hostel.

As well as referral for legal advice they offered befriending and practical help, such as the supply of food. They were also involved in training a volunteer to teaching English as a foreign language to help refugees.

[2.2.K] **Childcare Provision**. This was reported by half of the groups. This ranged from playgroups and crèche facilities to summer play schemes, camps, classes in the scriptures and recreational activities. Other groups also reported informal help with baby-sitting.

One long running playgroup, active for 14 years, was under threat because the organiser had other commitments and there was no obvious replacement. This fragility of groups based wholly on voluntary effort was often mentioned by respondents, who saw it as sometimes acting as a disincentive to initiating projects.

[2.2.L] **Parenting Support**. Only three groups reported offering parenting support. One initially answered 'no' but later in the interview went on to mention a 'Mothers' Discussion Group'. This reflects a general problem encountered in these interviews. Interviewees tend not to think about activities in terms of formal labels. Activities experienced as embedded in what they did as a faith community were not always easy to define in other terms.

Other groups acknowledged informal support, particularly through the medium of extended family networks.

[2.2.M] **Other.** Among other activities mentioned which may be included in this category was the running of a 'drop-in' centre for young people who had been excluded from school.

Another innovative youth project involved young people in environmental improvements through removing graffiti, cleaning communal areas, gardening and decorating homes for vulnerable residents, as well as organising local community activities, like a football match.

Another was the holding of an electoral debate, between local representatives of the major parties, from a faith-based perspective, at the time of the last General Election.

This is important from a social capital perspective, because there is strong evidence that engagement in faith-based activities can enable the development of civic skills. This has been linked to people becoming more willing to join in and the growth of civic and political activism. It

has been characterised as a natural 'knock-on' effect, so it would be interesting to investigate further how common and effective such conscious interventions are.

This is particularly relevant in the context of lower levels of political participation amongst minority ethnic groups.

`http://www.observer.co.uk/race/story/0,11255,604016,00.html`)

2.3 Education

[2.3.A] **IT Training** was offered by three of the faith groups. One held a small weekly class that taught basic IT skills.

The second worked through the Local Education Authority with a local college to provide a range of courses for the wider community, from introductions and basic skills to courses leading to nationally recognised qualifications.

This service alone provided almost 40 hours of teaching time per week spread over fourteen separate sessions, morning, afternoon and evening. Some were available on weekdays and others at weekends, so as to be available to people with a wide range of work and social commitments. In all there were about 60 pupils each week, with some attending several courses.

The other group were also in the process of exploring more formal IT training, using professional rather than the volunteer trainers currently involved.

A fourth group had previously held IT classes, but these were suspended at the time of the interview.

[2.3.B] **Language classes** were held by nearly all groups (10/12). These included English as a Foreign Language (EFL) which, in many cases, was particularly geared towards the needs of the elderly.

The group involved with supporting people awaiting asylum decisions was training a group member as an EFL teacher to work with them.

Courses teaching the languages of their scriptures and of previous generations were frequently aimed at the children of community members. It was pointed out that in some cases language skills had 'skipped a generation' and were now being re-introduced within communities.

These classes were often also open to others interested in learning the language. In one scheme, involving about 225 children, Gujarati speakers were encouraged to learn Hindi and Hindi speakers Gujarati, to GCSE standard.

One group also employed professional teachers to supplement the national curriculum teaching of their children, from key stage 1–2 up to GCSE and A level English. They saw being taught as part of a cohesive and supportive group as being of particular benefit to these children.

[2.3.C] **Literacy Classes,** three groups also reported holding literacy classes.

[2.3.D] **School Liaison** might involve visits by parties from local schools to places of worship or members of the faith group visiting schools. Eleven of the twelve groups reported involvement in this sort of activity.

Most gave this work a very high priority with individuals donating a lot of time and effort to creating a better understanding of their group. One group reported twenty-five school visits a year.

Another was regularly involved in local school assemblies with two people devoting about an hour a week to this. They were also involved in working with young people in schools who were excluded from the classroom as well as running the drop-in centre for excluded children mentioned above. It is estimated that the two people involved in that project devote about 168 hours a month between them.

One group also ran courses for local teachers, to promote understanding of their religion and the doctrinal needs of their children. The courses explaining doctrinal needs of Islamic children to local teachers from other religions were seen as being particularly valuable.

[2.3.E] **Other educational activities** included, at one centre an Access to Nursing and an Access Higher Education course organised by a local college. They also offered vocational training including courses for beauticians and childminders. Home-carers were offered training. Needlework and craft lessons were also available.

Another group provided history classes and was starting to offer GCSE maths.

Some classes allowed the various faith communities to address some of the specific social needs of members. A number of groups with membership from the Indian subcontinent ran 'catch-up' classes for children who had spent long periods of time abroad.

In addition to the classes outlined above, participants also mentioned the importance to them of the religious education of their children within the group. One group reported between 200 and 300 children a week attending religious evening classes.

Traditional cultural skills (music, language, cooking and crafts) were also promoted through youth groups.

2.4 Community and Leisure

[2.4.A] **Youth Groups**. Ten participant groups organised some youth groups, several organised more than one. These provided a range of activities, sports, drama, music, dance, cookery and needlecrafts as well as providing the opportunity for working in the community or offering practical and emotional support to young homeless people.

For some it was important that youth groups were gender segregated and they ran separate groups for boys and girls.

One youth group organised an international exchange visit scheme, ran an 'Anglo-Sikh Heritage Trail' involving about 100 participants, and had its own website.

One group that did not have a formal youth club did have a 'drop-in' facility used by young people as a meeting place.

Most youth groups relied on volunteers though one group reported employing a full-time youth worker.

[2.4.B] **Music Societies**. Seven groups ran music activities. These ranged from teaching the playing of traditional instruments, through dance groups and choirs to the sharing of 'music evenings'.

[2.4.C] **Art Classes**. None of the groups reported running art classes, though traditional arts and crafts were being taught in some of the youth groups.

[2.4.D] **Sporting Activities**. Six of the groups were involved in sporting activities. These ranged from Tae-Kwondo, table tennis, cricket, football, basketball and squash, to a ladies' group who visit a local gym together.

Another respondent reported that their group had been using the facilities of a local community centre, which had recently been closed. Their sporting activities were suspended while fundraising took place to buy their own equipment, which they could use in their new premises.

It was noticeable that some groups were extremely active in this area and ran a number of different teams and clubs.

[2.4.E] **Keep Fit**. Five groups reported running keep-fit classes, while a sixth expressed the wish to establish one. It seemed to be an activity particularly aimed at women.

[2.4.F] **Interest/Hobby Groups**. Only one of the respondents reported running interest or hobby groups. This category was included to give respondents the opportunity to discuss any clubs or activities not covered by more specific questions.

The respondent that used it did so to describe a group that organised outings to local places of interest.

Although many of the other activities already mentioned as being undertaken by the groups could be defined in these terms, this is not how they were characterised by the respondents. For example, we might include the music, cookery and needlework classes in this category.

Several groups who owned substantial premises mentioned that other community and leisure groups, from yoga classes to stamp collecting clubs, used their premises for a small hire charge.

[2.4.G] **Lunch clubs** for the elderly were reported by eight groups. One of these ran three times a week for about 50 people.

Another was twice weekly and catered for 60–70 elderly people from more than one religious community. Four provided weekly meals for from 25–60 people each and another was fortnightly, catering for about 30. Another had been weekly but was less frequent at the time of the interview.

One lunch club, previously offered, had been suspended, due to a change of premises, but the group intended to re-launch and expand it in the near future. Another was also suspended because of what was hoped to be a temporary lack of helpers.

Some of these clubs also invited guest speakers, organised advice sessions and informal language teaching as well as occasional day trips.

In addition to this a number of groups also organised regular communal meals on which occasion people brought food to share.

[2.4.H] **Coffee Mornings**. Six group organised coffee mornings that worked on a 'drop in' basis, usually once or twice weekly.

[2.4.I] **Environmental Groups**. Only one of the respondents reported an environmental group. This group was very active in promoting recycling and tree-planting.

[2.4.J] **Dances/Discos**. Three groups reported organising dances and discos. One described themselves as holding 'lots' while the other two both held them around two to three times a year.

Many others offered similar entertainment related to religious festivals and rites of passage (initiation of children, weddings and so on). Feasts and festivals were described by a number of respondents as being central to the cohesion of the group and the feeling of belonging that enabled other activities.

Youth and music groups also often involved the teaching and performance of traditional dances.

[2.4.K] **Other activities** mentioned included quiz nights and discussion circles; clubs for people with links to particular Irish counties and a number of groups also ran occasional day-trips. Indeed, there were over forty different types of social activity engaged in by the twelve groups.

A number of charity fundraising events involve the organisation of social, leisure or sporting events as well as raising money for local, national and international causes. Even the circulation of charity appeal envelopes and collection boxes, and the sale of raffle tickets can encourage people to meet and talk. Other activities have further benefits.

Jumble sales and white elephant stalls also encourage recycling and often provide affordable access to resources. Bazaars, craft and cake stalls also offer an outlet for the community's creativity. Tabletop and car boot sales can provide an entrepreneurial opportunity to people with limited funds.

Participation in all these activities can help build capacity and co-operation within the community and facilitate skill sharing.

2.5 Social and Doctrinal Needs

Respondents were often reluctant to describe their activities in terms of the needs of their own faith group. The question posed was: 'Are any of those activities particularly tailored to the social or doctrinal needs of the members of your faith group?' Although only five respondents answered 'yes' to the direct question researchers identified four more groups as providing this sort of service.

It could be seen as measure of how vulnerable some faith groups feel, that they tended to see this question as a criticism, possibly implying insularity or a level of social exclusion which they were unwilling to own. It is perhaps telling that the only group to answer this question with an unequivocal 'Yes, most activities run by church members are doctrinally based' was a very self-confident Christian group.

It is also interesting that the only group to discuss the particular ethnic and cultural needs of group members in the context of this question was another Christian group that had strong links with the Irish community.

As we have seen already, a number of activities described above were clearly prompted by the particular needs of group members (i.e. language classes, religious classes, traditional music and crafts, 'catch-up' classes for children returning from travel abroad, gender division of youth activities, and the provision of loans to those unable to use the mainstream banking service because of a doctrinal ban on interest payments). Some activities addressed gaps in services that led to the needs of group members not being met (i.e. school, hospital and prison liaison, advocacy and advice services). Respondents tended to understate (and perhaps undervalue) their role in identifying these needs and filling the gaps in mainstream provision.

2.6 Economic Impact

We placed little emphasis on the economic impact of faith communities; faith leaders also felt uncomfortable dealing with this issue. It may be that, once more, they feared being considered insular.

We asked one question on this subject: 'Does your organisation have a policy designed to support local economic activity (for example buying local goods and services)?' We found that four groups had a conscious policy of purchasing goods or services locally while another group, which had no such explicit policy, did so in practice because of convenience.

One group also held a weekly stall selling 'Fair-Trade' goods.

2.7 Summary of findings.

We found a wide range of activities in each of our categories taking place in faith groups around both Peterborough and Luton, yet the organisation of activities varied enormously. Some groups had clear, formally institutionalised channels for many activities while in others informal networks

along with an ethos of care and responsibility for the welfare of others, often within and between extended families, were utilised.

This led some participants to find some of our questions difficult to engage with. If the group includes a number of doctors and lawyers who are 'sounded out' informally by group members about a problem, before being consulted professionally or advice being sought elsewhere, did this count as health or social support provision by the group?

Clearly, in terms of Putnam's concept of social capital it does. In fact it is exactly this type of unintended benefit of group membership that makes social capital so important. Unfortunately, it is also the most difficult element to measure.

Because participants were unfamiliar with the way their activities could be conceptualised in terms of social capital, a number were under reported, initially. The activities had simply not been thought about in the same language in which the questions were couched.

We found that there was a tendency to answer 'no' to direct questions about specific provision but described projects and activities later in the course of the interview that did fit the criteria. In one case, the participant reported that there were no health, social, educational or community and leisure support provisions in their group, but later mentioned music and language classes, informal help with transport, particularly for the elderly, and shared meals, all of which had been interpreted as service provision by other groups.

The most pessimistic estimate came from a group that had recently relocated and was having difficulties re-establishing activities previously engaged in. A local community centre they had been using had been closed without alternative provision being made. This meant that they needed to raise funds to provide equipment for sporting activities they had been able to access there previously. They felt that other communities had been better supported by their local authority. There were also access problems associated with their new premises, which again led them into negotiations with the local council. Because of all these pressures on time and resources, they were feeling disrupted and exhausted, but it was hoped that some of the past activities would be re-introduced when funds and energy became available.

This helps highlight the need to remember that in presenting our findings we are giving a 'snapshot' of the current provision of activities, which are likely to change through time. It also serves to remind us that a faith group does not function in a vacuum, but within a broader set of structures that can limit, as well as promote, its impact. Time and place are both important.

As has been pointed out earlier, voluntary activities often rely on a key individual who coordinates and enthuses others. When that individual is not able to fulfil that function provision can become very fragile.

Among the major reasons people offered for giving up volunteer work, a recent study found, was that it was 'getting too much' for them. Seventy per cent of active volunteers interviewed believed their efforts could be better organised and utilised.
http://www.ivr.org.uk/nationalsurvey.htm.

Several of our respondents expressed the belief that employing a coordinator, or counsellor could facilitate service provision.

Other participant groups felt very positive and were engaged in a large number of projects, often consciously seeking to enhance community facilities through partnerships with other local groups.

Those who had established partnerships with local charities and other service providers, like CRUSE, Help the Aged, local night shelters and the Local Education Authority were enabled to expand their activities and share some of the administrative burden. This sort of arrangement can also facilitate inter-community activities and build bridges across social divides.

Groups who owned premises, far from bemoaning the responsibility of their upkeep, as implied by the ODPM, were enthusiastic about describing the range of activities undertaken there and how many community members from outside their faith group were able to participate in them.

One respondent from the Islamic community described their group as 'looking towards the wider community to find caring situations', while a member of the Sikh community saw support being engendered by the 'core values of worship, work and charity'.

Representatives of Hindu, Islamic Sikh and Jewish communities all emphasised the importance of family support networks within their communities. A lot of community support was seen as resting on the base of these networks with family structure reinforcing that of the faith group and the group sustaining the family.

This reflects the importance of values and cultural practices underpinning each faith group and helping to model their particular activities. Perhaps this also suggests that some groups could currently have a unique opportunity to provide focus and identity to some minority groups.

There were often clearly identified differences in need between generations within the communities, yet these could be addressed within the group.

For instance, a large proportion of participants (10 out of 12) provided language classes. In some cases these were aimed at children, teaching the language of their scriptures or of previous generations.

Some groups also provided English classes for those of their elderly members for whom it was not the first language; sometimes this was incorporated into the activities of a social or lunch club that also included members of other faith groups.

As this example demonstrates, it is not always easy to place activities in simple categories. Educational, cultural, social, and implicitly, spiritual functions can all be served by the same activities. Besides the practical benefits of such provisions, they may in turn have the unintended benefits associated with high levels of social capital including improvements in health, well-being, and lower crime rates due to enhanced social cohesion.
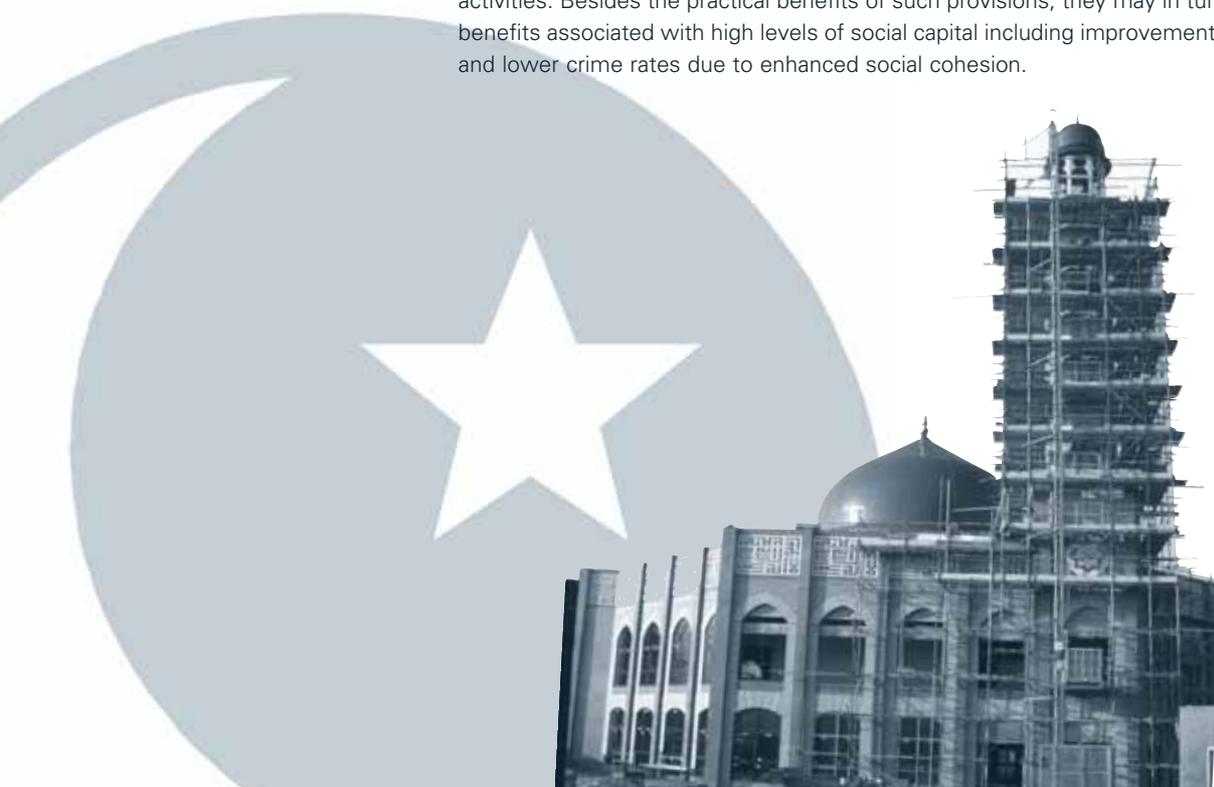
3. Conclusions and recommendations

Points to note

i   There is a focus on the current provision; this changes over time. For example a playgroup or lunch-club may collapse for lack of volunteers and a dance class or football team might be founded.

ii   Working in partnerships enables greater flexibility and continuity of service provision. This can be an important consideration when seeking the support of funding bodies.

iii   Respondents were not always comfortable discussing their activities in terms of social capital. Faith groups may tend to understate and undervalue their contribution to society. It would help to strengthen funding applications and lobbies for practical support if groups could be made aware of and discuss their potential impact in terms that policy makers understand.

iv   Faith groups are often particularly well placed to identify the social needs of their own members.

v   Activities that spring from the needs of one group in the community often also benefit others outside that group.

vi   Access to premises is often key to enabling activity.

The results of this study show an impressive range of social benefits that emanate from religious groups in Peterborough and Luton. However it is also clear that these are not being developed to their full potential.

A number of respondents expressed their group's desire to expand and increase activities but found the amount of time and effort involved in fundraising prohibitive, particularly for the less affluent groups. One respondent said 'The community is a charitable organisation, it cannot fund everything itself'. Another reported that informal and ad-hoc help was often all that was available because 'lack of resources curtails more formal provision.'

The complicated and time consuming processes involved in funding applications were often daunting to volunteers, leading to delays in the initiation of projects, the need for which had been identified. Simplifying the procedures of funding bodies for small projects could be enormously productive, freeing up volunteer time and effort to run projects rather than seek funds.

It might be helpful if faith groups were more able to describe the impact of their own activities in terms of social capital. Funding bodies are likely to be more open to applications that are couched in these terms. The findings of this study support Finneron and Dinham, when they say: 'Faith groups should learn how to express what they do in a way that others can understand, relate to and value.' (Finneron and Dinham: 2000: p 6)

It need not undermine the spiritual value of a religious community to acknowledge that it also brings about social benefits. These might be better explained and maximised if they were consciously recognised and discussed. This process would also enable a more reflexive approach to service provision and the spread of best practice models.

Groups seemed particularly unaware of their potential positive impact on mental and emotional well being, especially for individuals vulnerable to isolation and social exclusion, for instance people with language or mobility difficulties. Perhaps some joint training of volunteers could encourage and enable interfaith discussion of these issues, producing an exchange of experience and understanding.

Partnerships with other groups and agencies seem to offer a number of potential benefits. These include the sharing of training, administration, skills, information and costs and the building of mutual understanding and trust. This can help to create what Boix and Posner describe as the

'virtuous circle' (Boix and Posner: 1998: p 690) of repeated co-operative interactions setting up norms of mutual trust and co-operation within the community.

Partners can also help to maintain service provision at times when a faith group, particularly if it is one of the smaller ones, is in a state of transition or when key members are less available.

Faith liaison groups were highly valued by respondents to this study. It may be possible to build on these to develop more and improved joint service provision. The Working Party on London Methodism has argued that there are growing opportunities for faith groups to work with government agencies to achieve social regeneration. However, they also say that effective engagement with Regional Development Agencies and other bodies will require the further strengthening of the structures of faith cooperation.
http://www.methodist.org.uk/information/02london.htm

The Church Urban Fund has also identified strategic and informational benefits that accrue when faith groups who are involved in service provision 'position themselves as part of the local community and voluntary sector' (Musgrave: 1999).

The fact that only one of the respondents reported any environmental groups or activities is disappointing, given the principles and recommendations contained in the 1995 Ohito Declaration on Religions, Land and Conservation.
http://www.millennium-debate.org/ohito2.htm.

The call for the promotion of environmental awareness in education and practice are particularly relevant and faith groups could, easily and profitably, develop links with environmental groups offering energy and waste management advice in order to integrate conservation concerns into the mainstream management of their premises and activities. Being able to demonstrate that these policies are in place can be important when negotiating with some funding bodies.

This said, it is extraordinary to find such a wealth of activities among participating faith groups; given that some them were very small with fewer than 150 families. The running of these activities often depends on the hard work and goodwill of a few individuals and may fail if they are faced with outside resistance rather than support. If they receive this support it is often not only the faith group that benefits, but the community as a whole.
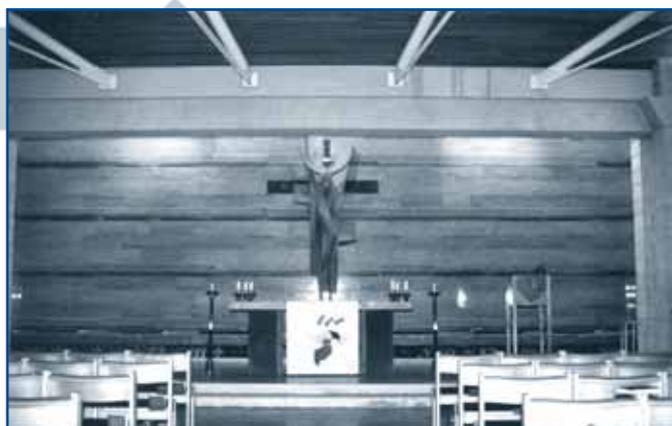
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Appendix 1. Patterns of volunteering in the UK since 1981.

Percentage of people who undertook voluntary work: 1981–1997.
Data: Institute for Volunteering Research. http://www.ivr.org.uk/nationalsurvey.htm
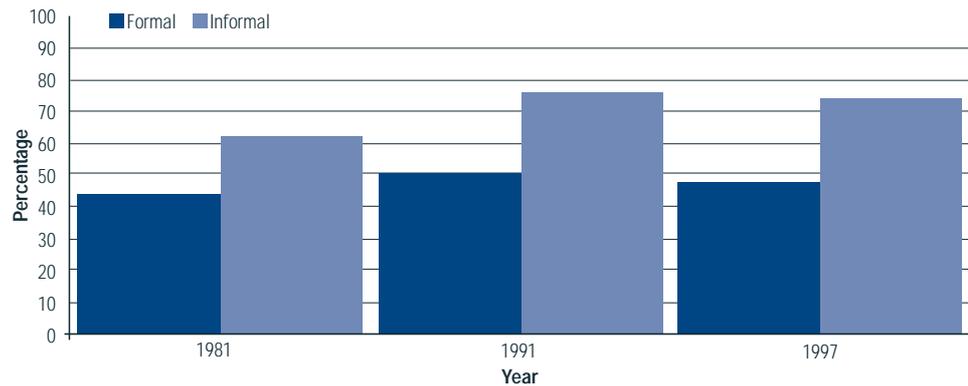
Percentage of people involved in voluntary work divided by age.
Data: Institute for Volunteering Research. http://www.ivr.org.uk/nationalsurvey.htm
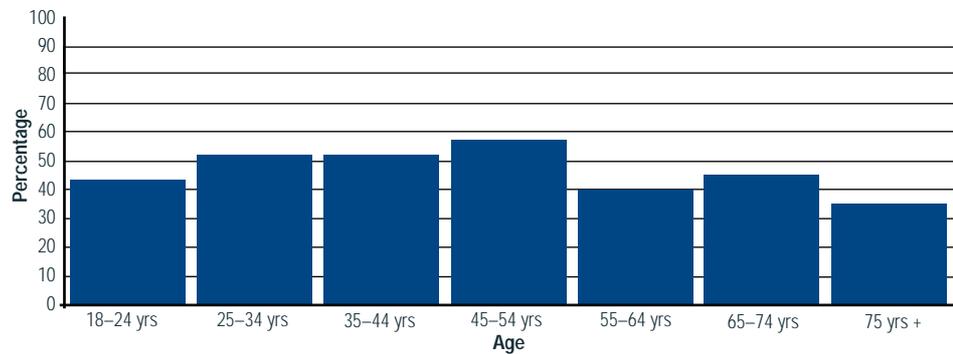
Appendix 2. Useful websites.

Institute for Jewish Policy Research http://www.jpr.org.uk

Institute for Volunteering Research http://www.ivr.org.uk

Interfaith Network for the UK http://www.interfaith.org.uk

Joseph Rowntree Trust http://www.jrf.org.uk

Methodist conference paper on London regionalisation
http://www.methodist.org.uk/information/02london.htm

The Millennium Debate http://www.millennium-debate.org

New Economics Foundation http://www.neweconomics.org

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
http://www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/community
Particularly http://www.urban.odpm.gov.uk/community/faith/involve

Race and Public Policy Research Unit (RAPP) http://www.leeds.ac.uk/sociology/rapp/rapp.htm

Urban Forum http://www.urbanforum.org.uk

Appendix 3. Sample questionnaire (reduced version).

1. Name of faith group/place of worship.

2. Contact Address.

3. Contact Name.

Interviewer may also wish to add something about the circumstances of the interview, (e.g. location).

Do members of faith group provide any of the following community activities?   (tick appropriate box)

Please estimate the hours per month involved in organising this activity and the number of people using the service. It may not be possible to get these figures but would be useful.

4 Health support services.

		Hrs	No.s	Comments
a) Hospital visiting.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
b) Sick visiting at home.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
c) Health advice.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
d) Mental health support.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
e) Transport services for the sick and infirm.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
Other – please specify.	No ☐ Yes ☐			

5. Social support services.

a) Housing advice.	No ☐ Yes ☐
b) Homeless services.	No ☐ Yes ☐
c) Support for independent community living by disabled people.	No ☐ Yes ☐
d) Benefit/financial advice.	No ☐ Yes ☐
e) Financial services (credit union or loans for example).	No ☐ Yes ☐
f) Bereavement counselling.	No ☐ Yes ☐
g) Food distribution.	No ☐ Yes ☐
h) Advocacy.	No ☐ Yes ☐
i) Community liaison.	No ☐ Yes ☐
j) Citizenship advice.	No ☐ Yes ☐
k) Childcare services.	No ☐ Yes ☐
l) Parenting support.	No ☐ Yes ☐
Other – please specify.	No ☐ Yes ☐

6. Educational services.

a) IT training.	No ☐ Yes ☐
b) Language classes.	No ☐ Yes ☐
c) Literacy classes.	No ☐ Yes ☐
d) School liaison.	No ☐ Yes ☐
Other – please specify.	No ☐ Yes ☐

7 Community and Leisure activities.

		Hrs	No.s	Comments
a) Youth groups.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
b) Music societies.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
c) Art classes.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
d) Sporting activities.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
e) Keep fit.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
f) Interest/hobby groups.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
g) Lunch clubs. (e.g. for the elderly)	No ☐ Yes ☐			
h) Coffee mornings.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
i) Environmental groups.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
j) Dances/discos.	No ☐ Yes ☐			
Other – please specify	No ☐ Yes ☐			

8 Are any of these activities particularly tailored to the social or doctrinal needs of the members of your faith group?

No ☐   Yes ☐

Please specify

9 Does your organisation have any policy designed to support local economic activity (for example buying local goods and services)?

No ☐   Yes ☐

Please specify.

Please add any information you think relevant and would like to share with us. Thank you for your co-operation with this study. Please feel free ask any questions.

Appendix 4. Number of groups from each area involved in specified activities.

(figures in brackets are researchers' revised figures or concerns about figures offered, derived from interview texts)

4 Health support services

	P'borough Num/6	Luton Num/6
a) Hospital visiting.	3(5)	6
b) Sick visiting at home.	3(5)	6
c) Health advice.	1(3)	3(4)
d) Mental health support.	0(6?)	4(+)
e) Transport services for the sick and infirm.	2(6)	5(6?)

5 Social support services.

a) Housing advice.	2(4?)	3
b) Homeless services.	1(+)	3(5?)
c) Support for independent community living by disabled people.	0(?)	2
d) Benefit/financial advice.	2(+)	3
e) Financial services (credit union or loans for example).	0(1)	2(1)
f) Bereavement counselling.	5(?)	6
g) Food distribution.	2(3+)	2(3)
h) Advocacy.	1(?)	2
i) Community liaison.	5(6)	6
j) Citizenship advice.	0	4
k) Childcare services.	3(+)	3(+)
l) Parenting support.	1(+)	2(+)

6 Educational services.

a) IT training.	2	1
b) Language classes.	5	5
c) Literacy classes.	2	1
d) School liaison.	5	6

7 Community and Leisure activities.

a) Youth groups.	6	4 (+1)
b) Music societies.	2	5
c) Art classes.	0(+)	0(+)
d) Sporting activities.	3(+)	3
e) Keep fit.	2	3
f) Interest/ hobby groups.	0(?)	1(?)
g) Lunch clubs/communal meals	4(6)	4
h) Coffee mornings.	1	5
i) Environmental groups.	0	1
j) Dances/discos.	1	2

8 Services tailored to specific social/doctrinal need?	0(4)	5
9 Local purchasing policy	3	1

A REPORT ON FAITH COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL
IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND

FOR THE EAST OF ENGLAND FAITHS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

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