



**Sheffield Faiths Forum**  
**Audit of Faith Related**  
**Community Activity**  
**Executive Summary**

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## ***Background***

This research was commissioned by Sheffield Faiths Forum to build on the anecdotal evidence about several high profile examples of involvement of faith groups in community activity, to start to develop a strong evidence base of the faith sector's contribution to the city. The aims of the research were to:

- assess the potential for faith groups to have an impact on key issues for the city such as community cohesion and regeneration;
- raise awareness of the contribution of faith communities among partners and stakeholders;
- strengthen the rationale for why faith communities should be involved in decision making.

The research is set against a policy background which both recognises the value and contribution made by faith groups to the social capital of the country and encourages greater involvement of local people and communities in decision making. During the course of this research, the Department for Communities and Local Government has launched 'Face to Face and Side by Side', a consultation into how government can best support faith groups' engagement with their local communities and the National Empowerment Network to take forward greater community involvement in decision making. Both the recent Local Government White Papers and the Third Sector Review have emphasised the importance of Local Government engaging with faith communities.

## ***Approach***

Information was collected by circulating a survey form to 314 faith organisations on the Faiths Forum database. A web search was also carried out of faith groups identified as particularly active. Face to face interviews were carried out with ten organisations to gather in depth information for some case studies. The information was analysed in relation to four key themes of Sheffield First, the Local Strategic Partnership:

- Strong economy
- Successful neighbourhoods
- Inclusive, healthy communities
- Great place to grow up

An analysis was also undertaken of how the identified activities contributed to the social capital of the city.

The survey was subject to the twin constraints of time limits and resources. This limited the scope of the survey to that activity that takes place collectively on behalf of faith groups themselves ('religious capital'). Activity undertaken directly by individuals as a result of their faith ('spiritual capital') was not covered in this audit. Some consideration has, however, been given to physical capital as many faith groups have buildings which provide for a range of community needs.

## ***Main findings***

Eighty two completed survey forms were received, giving a response rate of 26%. The survey results demonstrate a wide range of activities taking place across a number of faiths and denominations. This range of activity contributes to all of the themes of the Local Strategic Partnership and to the different levels of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking.

## ***Detailed findings***

**A Strong Economy** - The findings provide evidence of faith groups operating or supporting social and community enterprises, acting as collection points for a Credit Union, running charity shops, making training provision and providing conference facilities. There are a number of high profile examples across the city eg St Mary's at Bramall Lane, the Megacentre, the Terminus Initiative and the New Roots shop and café at the Burngreave Ashram.

**30% of groups responding are involved in activities that contribute towards a strong economy**

**Successful Neighbourhoods** - Faith groups provide a wide range of facilities and activities that help to make a neighbourhood a better place to live. These include coffee mornings, lunch clubs, arts and musical events, cafés and other opportunities for social gatherings. Many also work to make neighbourhoods more welcoming for asylum seekers and refugees by providing women's conversation clubs, English classes, food parcels and space for worship for groups without their own buildings. The physical capital held by faith groups is used by a number of local decision making forums, community safety groups and Neighbourhood Watch groups.

**62% of responding groups carry out activities that contribute towards the neighbourhood being a better place to live.**

**Inclusive, Healthy Communities** - The two significant areas of provision highlighted in the findings are the opportunities provided for physical activity and sport and the support given to older people. In addition, a number of groups provide advice and counselling, drug and alcohol user support, provision for learning disabled people, work with users of mental health services, provision of food and clothing for homeless people, bereavement groups and parenting support. Many also provide office or meeting space for voluntary and statutory organisations meeting a range of health needs.

**80% of responding faith groups are involved in activities that promote inclusive, healthy communities.**

**A Great Place to Grow Up** - Provision made for children and young people ranges from parent and toddler groups to the Big Lottery funded Family Development Project in Darnall. In between are youth clubs, pre-schools, homework clubs, holiday clubs and uniformed youth groups. Faith group premises are used by Homestart and Surestart groups, dance classes and martial arts groups and children's parties.

**52% of groups responding provide services and facilities for children and young people.**

## ***Social capital***

**Bonding capital:** “Relationships between people with shared beliefs and values.” - Faith groups have an important role in providing people with a ‘spiritual home’ and a base for putting their values into action. A number of examples are given in the research of small groups without the physical numbers to carry out community activity but who offer a place for people with strong mutual commitments to come together.

**Bridging capital:** “Groups or individuals work together and form bridges between themselves and others.” - The research produced evidence of links within individual faiths, with other faiths, with national and international organisations and with a wide range of secular organisations. These range from the Race Equality Council and OFFER to community forums, advice centres, healthy living projects, community and youth associations, older persons’ networks, youth forums, asylum seekers’ groups, parish councils and carnival committees. It is clear that faith groups of all persuasions make a significant contribution to local community action.

**Linking capital:** “Links between people and organisations beyond peer boundaries which enable people to exert influence and reach outside normal circles.” - A number of examples of linking capital are provided in the case studies; of a church sharing space with refugee worshipping communities, the City of Sanctuary movement and of an Anglican based project (Together for Regeneration) that works to support churches and community groups to become involved with regeneration.

## ***Conclusions***

- The amount of faith related community activity taking place in Sheffield is massive. There is evidence of activity among a diverse range of groups not only for the benefit of their members but also for the wider community in their local neighbourhoods, across the city and for people coming as strangers to the city.
- The evidence collected shows the many ways in which faith groups meet the priorities of Sheffield First both in terms of the work carried out directly by groups and the ways in which their buildings are used.
- Faith groups that are based within and serve neighbourhoods provide a wide range of facilities and activities that make a neighbourhood successful, a great place to grow up, and an inclusive and healthy place to be and promote a stronger economy for local people.

Whilst faith groups clearly have a significant contribution to make to the city, recent research findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggest a number of obstacles which might prevent faith communities from fulfilling their potential, including limited capacity some groups have in terms of energy, confidence and time commitment and lack of support from government bodies for the work they do. The researchers also sound a warning note that compliance with government agendas may serve to undermine the energy and distinctiveness of faith related networks and enterprise.

### ***Way forward***

This research has only skimmed the surface of a very deep topic. It has explained the work of faith groups but not covered the work carried out by individuals that is inspired by the values and beliefs of their faith. The resource constraints imposed also mean that some tempting leads to further information were not followed up, therefore this account may not represent the full amount of activity taking place within the responding groups. There is scope for further work to collect additional information about some of the faith groups responding to the survey, to explore other faith groups that we discovered during the research and to develop further interesting case studies.

A copy of the full report and a detailed table of findings can be downloaded from [www.sheffieldfaithsforum.org.uk](http://www.sheffieldfaithsforum.org.uk) or requested in hard copy by contacting

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