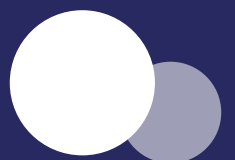




January 2022

More than Sundays:

Realising the potential of local church communities to support vulnerable children and families





“Reach out to your faith communities.

Begin the conversation. Be open to the dialogue. Be ready to outline the needs of your population. Sow the seeds of how those needs might be met and then allow the solutions to come and to be co-constructed because they will grow from the strengths of your particular church and faith communities in your area ...[this is] such an important part of the way in which we meet children's needs locally.”

Ann James

Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council

This report has been produced jointly by two charities, Home for Good and Safe Families.



Home for Good is a UK-wide charity with an ambitious vision to find a home for every child who needs one. We seek to inspire those who might never have considered welcoming a vulnerable child into their family to step forward to foster, adopt or become a supported lodgings host. We then journey with them every step of the way – from inspiration right through to post-placement. We also equip their local community to offer the wraparound support that they need.



Safe Families is a charity that works with 49 local authorities across the UK to offer support to children, families and care leavers. We do this primarily, but not exclusively, with and through local churches. We have trained 7,000+ volunteers, from 1,000+ churches, and have connected them with local families. This bespoke, volunteer-led support provides families with the practical help needed whilst also offering a sense of hope and belonging.

Letter to the Review

TO THE REVIEW OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IN ENGLAND,

In June 2021, *The Case for Change*, published as part of your review, stated that we are not utilising the full potential of communities in supporting children and families.

We wholeheartedly agree. In fact, this is the reason Safe Families and Home for Good exist: to release the unique potential within one particular community – the Church – to support children and families.

We recognise that many communities are already playing a significant role. By focusing on this one community, we by no means want to diminish the incredible, transformational work done by so many other groups and organisations. We passionately believe that there is a role for everyone to play. But, as outlined in this report, we believe that what the Church has to offer is unique.

The Church, in reality, is made up of Christian communities of all sizes, demographics and styles, threaded together by a shared faith. It is this community, which can be found in every local area of the UK, that we as organisations seek to engage and equip to play their part. This report outlines four attributes of the Church that make it a resource that simply must be utilised to tackle the rising crises within the social care system. This includes the increasing number of children in care, the resulting impact on their lives and the lives of their families, and the associated spiralling costs. The four attributes of the Church discussed in this report include its size and locality, its ability to provide organic networks of support, the diversity of individuals and skills among its members and the theological calling at its heart which calls Christians to help the vulnerable.

In this report, we offer not only a vision, but a strategy proven to utilise the Church across England and indeed the whole of the UK to support and care for children and families. We believe that if the children's social care system and faith communities, such as the Church, can work together, we will see a significant shift in the outcomes and experiences of many more children and families.

As you consider how the system can change its approach to better serve children and families, we want to offer the Church as a key community that is altruistically motivated to be part of the solution. By encouraging Government, local authorities and agencies to partner with churches and organisations who engage with the Church at a national level (including Safe Families and Home for Good), we believe that significant value could be added to the system in providing volunteers, carers and communities who are willing to care for, serve and support children, young people and families.

Ultimately, our desire is to see families thrive. We want to see children supported to stay with their birth families where possible and for those who need to enter the care system to receive love, safety and stability in order to reach their potential. We commend this report to you for your consideration as you look to craft your final recommendations.



Kat

Kat Osborn
CEO, Safe Families



Tania

Tania Bright
CEO, Home for Good

Letter to the Church

TO THE UK CHURCH,

There are currently over 100,000 children in care across the UK. This number represents individual children and young people, each with a unique story, background and character. Many have gone through unimaginable challenges in their lives already and need to experience stability and love. We believe the Church has a role to play in providing the support and community that these children and their families need.

There is currently an [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) being undertaken in England, dubbed a “once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the children's social care system and provide children with loving, safe and stable families”.

We know that there is a huge amount of incredible social action happening across the UK that stems from churches of all denominations, demographics and theological persuasions. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the significant role that the Church can play in meeting the needs of communities and caring for the most vulnerable. Just as the Church has stepped up to tackle some of the biggest issues of our society during the pandemic, we see a gap within the children's social care system, long predating the pandemic, that we believe the Church can help to fill.

At Safe Families and Home for Good, we journey alongside thousands of individuals, couples and families who demonstrate their faith by supporting and caring for our most vulnerable children and families. In fact, the reason we each exist is to help the Church in the UK release its unique potential to help.

We have written this report because we believe that there is so much within the Church that could radically benefit many lives within the social care system for good. This report focuses on four attributes of the Church that give us reason to believe this and as the Children's Social Care Review in England is looking for solutions to the challenges and shortages within the system, we believe the Church has a part to play.

Although this report is aimed in part towards Government, local authorities and agencies, we are also calling the Church to step forward. There are too many children who are waiting too long for a home that can meet their needs. There are too many families who are struggling and who need someone to come alongside them. There are too many care leavers who are facing adulthood alone and feel unsure of where to turn. This report marks an opportunity for the Church to step forward in a greater way. Everyone has a role to play; some seem small, others appear large, but each one is vital. We as Home for Good and Safe Families stand ready to support the Church in considering how each member and local congregation might play its part in caring for the most vulnerable children and families.

We are not naive to the challenges that this will bring – it will require tenacity and determination from all of us – but the opportunity is before us to play a part in changing the lives of generations of children and families to come. Join with us and let's be the family and tribe that children and families need.



Kat

Kat Osborn
CEO, Safe Families



Tania

Tania Bright
CEO, Home for Good

Context

As this report is being written, we are only just beginning to see the extent of the deep impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has shone a light on some of the most acute challenges in our society, adding further weight to the epidemics of loneliness, mental health and poverty faced by so many. But alongside the exposure of these, it has also given fresh attention to the invaluable role that communities have to play in meeting the needs of vulnerable people in their localities.

This report also emerges at a time when our 'care' towards these groups is being reconsidered. The Government in England is currently undertaking a review of the Children's Social Care system, following in the footsteps of an extensive review conducted in Scotland between 2017 and 2020. The Review in England began in March 2021 and was premised around considering one central question:

How do we ensure that children grow up in safe, stable and loving families and where that is not possible, care provides the same foundations? ¹



In June 2021, the Review published its first paper, *The Case for Change*, which set out a summary of the key challenges heard by the Review during its first months, through its engagement with children, young people and care experienced adults, as well as professionals, charities, carers and parents. This report seeks to contribute and build upon one aspect of this document: the role of communities in supporting and caring for vulnerable children and families.

The *Case for Change* states that we are not currently utilising the full potential of communities in supporting children and families.² We wholeheartedly agree. There are myriad communities and community groups of all shapes and sizes working in every local area of the UK. Some centre around particular issues or shared beliefs and passions, others exist because of geography or a specific demographic. We believe that effectively harnessing the strengths of communities could radically reform the care, help and support that vulnerable children and families across our nation receive.

This report considers just one of these communities; that is, the Christian community, referred to throughout this report as 'the Church'. It sets out a vision for the significant role we identify this national community can play in supporting vulnerable children and helping families, and the attributes that mean it is well-placed to do so.

1. Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) *Early Plans*. Available [online](#).

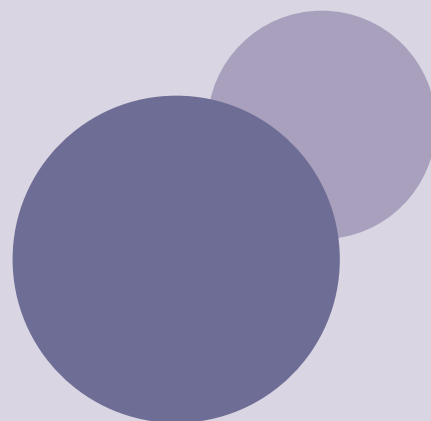
2. Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) *The Case for Change*. Available [online](#).



The Problem

Across the UK, there are over 100,000 children in the care system,³ with more than 80,000 of these in England alone.⁴ This number has been steadily increasing, with England seeing a 24% increase in the number of children in care over the past decade. Recent estimates suggest that the number of children in care in England could reach 100,000 by 2025 if patterns continue.⁵ Numerous stories, analyses and media coverage have highlighted the way in which this signifies a system struggling to cope and because of this, is too often failing to provide children, young people and families with the stability, love and support they need to thrive.

Recent economic analysis published by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care⁶ estimates that England is spending **£13.1billion** annually on the children's social care system and accompanying public services provided to children with a social worker. In addition, in March 2021, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that **£2.8billion** is spent each year on supporting children and young people who are part of the intergenerational cycle - those who have at least one parent who was in care themselves.⁷



3. Statistics - Home for Good. Available [online](#).
4. Department for Education (2021) *Children looked after in England, including adoptions, year ending 31 March 2021*. Available [online](#).
5. BBC Online (2020) 'Children in care in England could hit almost 100,000 by 2025'. Available [here](#).
6. Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) *Paying the Price*. Available [online](#).
7. PriceWaterhouse Coopers (2021) *The investment of a lifetime: delivering better outcomes for children in care*. Available [online](#).
8. Department for Education (2020) *Children in Need at 31 March 2020*; Department for Education (2013) *Children in Need at 31 March 2013*.
9. Department for Education (2010) *Children looked after in England, including adoptions, year ending 31 March 2010*. (n=64,400); Department for Education (2020) *Children looked after in England, including adoptions, year ending 31 March 2020* (n=80,080).
10. Department for Education (2021) *Children looked after in England, including adoptions, year ending 31 March 2021*. Available [online](#).
11. Scottish Government (2021) *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland, 2019-20*. Available [online](#).
12. Scottish Government (2021) *Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland, 2019-20*. Available [online](#).
13. Scottish Prison Service (SPS) (2019) *Prisoner Survey 2019*. Available [online](#).
14. Welsh Government (2021) *Experimental Statistics: Children looked after by local authorities, 2020-21*. Available [online](#).
15. Welsh Government (2021) *Experimental Statistics: Children looked after by local authorities, 2020-21*. Available [online](#).
16. National Assembly for Wales (2018) *Care experienced children and young people; Public Accounts Committee*. Available [online](#).
17. Department of Health (2021) *Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2020/21*. Available [online](#).
18. Department of Health (2021) *Northern Ireland Care Leavers 2019/20*. Available [online](#).

Despite this large investment, we are not seeing it produce the outcomes for children and families that so many in the system work tirelessly to pursue:

IN ENGLAND:



- The number of children classified as in need has **increased by 3%** since 2013. As of 31 March 2020, there were nearly **390,000 children in need**.⁸
- There has been a **24% increase** in the number of children in care over the past decade, with over 80,000 children and young people currently in care.⁹
- **41% of care leavers** aged 19-21 are not in education, employment or training.¹⁰

IN SCOTLAND:



- The number of children on the child protection register **increased by 3 %** from 2,580 in 2019 to 2,654 in 2020.¹¹
- In 2020, around **3,500 children entered the care system**.¹²
- **25% of prisoners** self-identified as **care experienced**, with **16%** of care experienced prisoners having had more than six different placements whilst in care.¹³

IN WALES:



- There are currently **more than 7,200 children** in the care system in Wales, which has been increasing year-on-year since 2015.¹⁴
- **6%** of these children were placed in homes outside of Wales.¹⁵
- **21% of children in care** achieved **5 or more GCSEs** at grades A*-C or the vocational equivalent in 2017, compared with **67%** of all pupils.¹⁶

IN NORTHERN IRELAND:



- There are **3,530 children in care** in Northern Ireland, a number that has **risen by 41%** over the last ten years.¹⁷
- **34% of young people** aged 16-18 left the care system in 2020 with no qualifications.¹⁸

The Church: More than Sundays

It is clear that more help is needed for vulnerable children and families, and that it is not right that the social care system shoulders the entire burden – it cannot provide all that a child or family needs in order to thrive. Despite heavy reliance on statutory professionals and services to deliver support and care for children and families, there is a finite capacity among these services that is only being stretched by the rising numbers of children entering care each year, with a growing complexity of needs. Added to this is the reality that ‘systems’ make for inadequate parents. They may provide structures and scaffolding but are ill-suited to provide the love and sense of belonging that is so necessary for human flourishing.

But people – individuals, couples, families and communities – can provide this and many already do. While there is a vital and irreplaceable role for statutory bodies, services and professionals to play in providing the necessary scaffolding around children and families, we will not see this result in the transformation of lives unless society as a whole recognises the part we can all play in supporting our most vulnerable children and families to thrive.



“The statutory children’s social care “system” is only the tip of the iceberg: promoting and protecting children’s welfare and rights must be a priority that goes beyond any single agency. The vast majority of the resources that exist to support families when they struggle, to keep children safe and to help them thrive when they can’t live at home, are in the places children live and with the relationships they already have.”¹⁹

The Case for Change, page 25

19. Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (2021) *The Case for Change*. Available [online](#).

It is this gap that faith communities are able to step into. Through our work at Safe Families and Home for Good, we are already seeing the immense impact that the local church can have in supporting vulnerable children and families and supplementing the work of the state.

In almost a decade of work with the Church, we have identified four key attributes that make it ideally placed to help:

1 SCALE AND LOCALITY

2 ORGANIC SUPPORT NETWORKS

3 A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

4 FAITH IN ACTION

We will now explore each of these attributes in turn.



ATTRIBUTE 1:

Scale and Locality

103,000

children in
care in UK ²⁰



399,510

children in need
in England ²¹

50,000

churches
across UK ²²



3,000,000

regular
churchgoers

The scale of need within the children's social care system is great, but, as the statistics above demonstrate, the scale of the Church across the UK means that it is a significant audience to engage. In addition to being a significantly sized group, the Christian church is geographically spread across England and the UK and is present in nearly every locality. Almost every village, estate and city centre has a church or multiple churches at its heart.

These local churches know their local communities. They know the schools, the libraries, the police and the local services. They know the local third sector organisations and they are often connected with other churches in neighbouring communities.

20. Statistics, Home for Good. Available [online](#).

21. Department for Education (2019) *Characteristics of Children in Need 2018-2019*. Available [online](#).

22. Brierley, Peter (2021) *UK Church Statistics No.4 2021 Edition*. Tonbridge: ADBC Publishers.

23. Kruger, D (2020) *Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant*. Available [online](#).



A REPORT BY DANNY KRUGER MP IN 2020 OUTLINED:

“[Faith communities] have deep roots in local communities and are there for the long-term. Indeed they often have big buildings in the heart of communities, including the poorest, and they operate both nationally and at the hyperlocal level. The networks of a faith community, the relationships within a congregation or faith group, are a source of huge resilience and opportunities for the people they seek to help.”²³



ATTRIBUTE 1:

Scale and Locality (continued)

Perhaps most significantly, each church is made up of people who live in these local communities. This is especially important as we consider the social care system. Many of the families in need of support are often nervous about approaching or receiving help from statutory services and professionals. They are often much more likely to receive help when they feel that they are being supported by someone who is a neighbour to them.

The reach of the Church into every locality means that wherever there is a need, churches who are inspired and equipped are geographically well-placed to get involved and offer support. And because of the deep local knowledge and understanding that comes from the way churches are ingrained within their communities in an ongoing way, the support they are able to offer can be nuanced and diversified to reflect the community they serve. In many instances, this knowledge and understanding is likely to be richer than that of external agencies.

CASE STUDY:

Jess's Story*



Jess spent many of her childhood and teenage years in the care system. Now, as an adult, she is married and has two children.

She says:

“When I started to unravel as an adult, I saw the Church step up. When my daughter became challenging, I didn’t know how to meet some of those needs in a positive way. So I would find myself shouting and screaming but at the same time thinking, “all I’m doing is what I don’t want to do”. I shared with people in my church that I wasn’t coping and I didn’t know how to.

It was when I said that that people began to come to me and say, “What can I do?”

The youth worker at our church became like a co-parent. She came to festivals that the children were participating in, she came to awards ceremonies. I recognised that my children needed far more stable adults than myself because I didn’t know how to be that parent. I know now that I can lean on others. That is genuinely where I’ve parented from – the success of my children is because of all of us. We invited the church to join in those things.

Our church ran many different courses, including a parenting course, which helped us to learn useful tips with other parents on the course and made us not feel alone in our parenting efforts. The most impactful memory I have is when we asked our church family to pray for us as I prepared to share about my past with my children. The church family were ready to help pick up the pieces if needed.”

* Names changed for anonymity.

ATTRIBUTE 2:

Organic support networks

Every family requires support at various points. For many families, this is provided by networks of wider family and friends. When life gets tough, as it does for everyone at times, these families can call on that support.

However, many families who engage with the social care system are often isolated and trapped in a cycle where they do not have the support networks around them that many of us take for granted. This means that when tough times hit, small obstacles that could be quickly resolved with the right support can sometimes spiral into bigger issues. If these support networks don't exist, it can be extremely hard to build them, especially when resilience and confidence are low.

So too, we know that caring for children and young people who have experienced trauma and loss in their lives can be challenging. Support is needed over the long term to enable foster, adoptive and kinship families to remain stable and safe environments for children.

Often, the support needs of these families are multifaceted. Some may need access to support and specialist interventions from trained professionals. Whilst expensive, it is vital that such provision is in place for when challenging and complex needs arise. However, in addition to these forms of support, we recognise that there are many other aspects to holistic support that can make a huge difference. Practical support, respite, encouragement, friendship, love and a listening ear are vital aspects of the support needed by children and families facing challenges. This is an area where the Church can make a huge difference.



"Our church has been an absolutely incredible support to us - from the point of application through our assessment and now as we're caring for children. They have prayed for us, cooked us meals, cleaned for us, organised playdates, offered parenting help when we needed it (which we did, we're new at this!), and everyone has made an effort with all the children we've cared for. We spoke to the children's church leaders to ensure they were prepared and they've been great, and so many people gave the children birthday cards too."

Anna, adoptive parent

Organic support networks (continued)

CASE STUDY:

Tam

Tam, aged 21, was referred to Safe Families when she moved into temporary accommodation for the safety of her and her two children. She grew up in care and had no support network but desperately wanted to do the best for her children. She said *“I just need someone to believe in me, and help me”*.

Through Safe Families, Tam was introduced to 5 trained and supported volunteers over a period of 18 months. They all played different roles in helping her gain the confidence she needed to start to thrive.

Peter and Vivienne would help look after the children and became like the grandparents they never had. Ray and Sue helped Tam find a home and taught her how to look after the garden. They taught her how to cut the grass and even built a shed together. During lockdown, Meg would grab shopping for Tam and be someone she could speak to when she needed to connect.

18 months after the initial support started, Tam has regained so much confidence in her ability to parent, build relationships and look after the house. She has also gone on to help organise events in the community for other families through Safe Families.

Tam said *“They were so supportive. I couldn’t ask for more. When you are in a bad place they help make it positive. So you’re not on your own.”*



While formal support groups and networks can take time to be established and developed, churches offer pre-existing supportive communities, ready to wrap around children and families. Toddler groups, kids clubs, youth work, family workers, pastoral care and regular, consistent gatherings of people are just some of the environments where relationships can be formed and the needs of families can begin to be met.

“I found it so interesting to explore our own support network with [our social worker]. It was eye-opening and affirming to see in black and white who our points of contact were if ever we had any trouble, if ever we needed any help. Many of those listed as part of our support network were members of our church family. I think that part of that is because for us, church has been a ready-made community. It’s an instant extended family.”

Sharon, foster carer



Many churches also run programmes that tackle challenges such as debt, substance misuse, relationship struggles and food poverty. Just as there is recognised benefit from bringing statutory services together, church communities can provide one central place for families and children to access support services in their locality. Accessing one of these services within a local church can often be a gateway to the other support services on offer. Such support is provided not through paid professionals, but most commonly through local volunteers and churchgoers who are passionate about meeting the needs of their community. For vulnerable families and care leavers, having these hubs of support that can meet their holistic needs and challenges is invaluable.

Furthermore, there is a shared desire within organisations who engage with churches to work together to more effectively serve children and families. This report is one such example of this. We recognise the overlap between our organisational focuses and are dedicated to working together to enable the needs of those in the system to be met in a holistic way.

Ultimately our desire is to ensure that every child and family has a place to belong. We know these networks and relationships can then help families to be more resilient when challenges arise. And existing communities, like churches, who are supported and equipped to be welcoming and open, can provide this.

ATTRIBUTE 3:

A Diverse Community

The children's social care system needs people with a wide range of experience: those who are seasoned at working with children, those who can support care-experienced young adults with budgeting and financial advice, medical professionals who can support the complex health and developmental challenges prevalent among those within the system and many more. The Church is full of individuals with such skills who are positively motivated to use their skills to serve children and families in their local communities.

As the Church is centred around a religious faith, it contains an incredible diversity of people. Individuals of all ages, relationship statuses, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and professions - all with a huge range of skills and expertise to offer. The greater the diversity of those ready and willing to stand alongside children and families as volunteers, carers, families or mentors, the more effectively children and families can be matched and the more likely that their needs will be met. This diversity of choice is vital for improving the chance of providing stability to vulnerable children and families.

CASE STUDY:

Kyle and Matt*

Kyle, age 15, was referred to Safe Families for the second time in 2020. Earlier in his life, he had experienced persistent abuse and neglect within the family home, with his siblings having entered the care system. In 2020, Kyle was struggling with substance misuse, had poor school attendance and was engaging in criminality. At the point of referral, Kyle was struggling with high levels of anxiety and his emotional wellbeing was deteriorating.

Through Safe Families, Kyle was paired with a male volunteer, Matt, who had been fully appraised of the situation. Matt was a builder and a prison volunteer who had experience of working with prisoners and providing them with emotional support. Matt took Kyle out regularly, giving him one-to-one support. Matt gave Kyle a Saturday job in his yard, providing him with a purpose and some structure. Kyle was motivated by this experience and was able to get to work on time and work hard.

Kyle was able to move away from the relationships that connected him with criminality and started attending school again. He completed his GCSEs and went on to learn bricklaying at college. Matt has told Kyle that if he keeps his placement and works hard, he will give him an apprenticeship. Kyle is now closed to all services, is settled, and is doing well as a result of being supported by someone he could relate to, who believed in him and gave him opportunities to succeed.

Kyle's social worker said: "Not only has Matt offered Kyle employment and education opportunities, he has continued to provide him with the nurturing/mentoring/ role model support he has needed throughout his life."

* Names changed for anonymity.

Alongside a diversity of skills and experience, the Church is not only large in scale but also contains individuals from every ethnic and cultural background. In the UK, Black African churches are one of the fastest growing denominations,²⁴ with around one in five (19%) of Black Londoners attending church each week.²⁵ Research shows that Chinese and Romanian churches are also growing at a significant pace.²⁶ By engaging with the Church, in its many beautifully diverse forms and expressions, there is an opportunity to encourage a diverse range of individuals and families to consider the part they might be able to play in supporting a vulnerable child.

This has become increasingly important over the last couple of years, as a spotlight has been shone on the importance of recognising, celebrating and supporting ethnic and cultural backgrounds as a part of individuals' identities. Alongside this is the reality that children and families from some ethnic backgrounds, particularly Black children, are overrepresented across the social care system. It is therefore vital that those journeying alongside and supporting children and families, either formally or informally, are as diverse a group as possible, in order to support the varied needs and backgrounds of those interacting with the system. This includes volunteers who support families on the edges of care, families and carers who step up to care for children and young people through fostering or adoption and individuals who journey alongside young people as mentors and advocates.

Research has also highlighted that there can be suspicion and caution among some individuals and communities about engaging with statutory services and programmes. For some, historical patterns of oppression or mistreatment by those in positions of authority have left a legacy of mistrust, meaning that families may shy away engaging with the system - both in seeking support for themselves, or to support others through formal ways of caring, including fostering and adoption. While faith communities are by no means exempt from such mistrust, they are viewed more positively than statutory services and provision by many.

As such, community groups such as faith communities are able to reach out and build relationships with those who may be hesitant about engaging with statutory services. Many churches and other religious centres are the hub of local cultural communities and therefore are ideally placed to play such a role.



24. Brierley Consultancy (2018) *UK Church Statistics No.3 2018 Edition*.

25. Cooper, L (2013) *Black and ethnic minority Christians lead London church growth*; Evangelical Alliance. Available [online](#).

26. Brierley Consultancy (2018) *UK Church Statistics No.3 2018 Edition*.

ATTRIBUTE 4:

Faith in Action

With around 50,000 churches across the UK - 40,000 in England alone - and church attendance standing at around three million people - 2.4million in England - the Church remains a staple of communities and a significant stakeholder across the nation.²⁷

But the Church has always been about more than Sundays.

At the heart of its theology, the Christian faith has a motivation to engage with social justice. The Bible encourages Christians to intentionally and sacrificially engage in love towards the stranger and the outsider.

The Bible says:



Truly, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

Matthew 25 v 40 (NIV)

Other commandments, such as to “*Love your neighbour as yourself*”²⁸, also encourage Christians to engage and interact with others in a way that gives them the same love and opportunities that they either have or would wish to have received.

Family is a strong theme that runs throughout the Bible that is not reserved to nuclear, biological families but encourages Christians to show love and welcome to the ‘orphan, widow, and the stranger’.²⁹ One passage within the Bible says that “*God places the lonely in families*”³⁰, which challenges Christians to offer a place of belonging to those who need one, including the most vulnerable within society. Within the Christian faith, there is a mandate upon Christians to support others to thrive and to reach their potential. At the heart of this is an acknowledgement of the importance of having a tribe or family to belong to.

“There are so many stories and examples of adoption and hospitality in the bible, and it’s something we are invited and called to be part of as the Church. I just can’t ignore the call in scripture to care for the vulnerable, to look out for those who need a family. Responding to this call will look different for everyone – for our family, it looks like fostering.”

Bella, foster carer



The Independent Care Review in Scotland outlined its position that children and families should be “loved, safe, and respected”³¹. So many foundational aspects of the Christian faith resonate with this call and are demonstrated consistently both in the Bible and in the activities that churches engage in all over the UK. In these places, Christians demonstrate sacrificial love as they seek to prioritise the needs of others and are compelled to step out and serve their communities.

A RECENT SURVEY AMONG 2,000 BRITISH ADULTS DEMONSTRATES THE WAY IN WHICH CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THEOLOGY IMPACTS THE BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES OF CHRISTIANS:³²

58%

of regular churchgoers said that they want to help vulnerable families and children within their local community, compared to 40% of the general population.

56%

of regular churchgoers said that they already were or would consider volunteering to support a family in their community who is struggling, compared to 38% of the general population.

75%

of regular churchgoers said that they thought hospitality was an important value, compared to 68% of the general population.

This theology is not just theory, it has consistently been used across church history.

The Christian faith has a long heritage of loving and caring for those who are vulnerable, those facing injustice and those who are marginalised. Examples such as William Wilberforce’s stand against the slave trade and Martin Luther King’s leadership of the Civil Rights Movement are often cited as examples of systemic change, but this can also be seen at a local level across England today.

27. Church Statistics (2015) *Introduction: UK Christianity 2005-2015*. Available [here](#).

28. Matthew 22:39, NIV

29. Deuteronomy 10:18, NLT

30. Psalm 68:8, NLT

31. Independent Care Review, Scotland (2020) *The Promise*. Available [here](#).

32. Savanta ComRes (2021) *Home for Good - supported lodgings*. Available [here](#).

Faith in Action (continued)

IN A 2014 SURVEY³³

48%

of adults in England reported that they had accessed community services.



51%

of adults accessed services provided by churches or church groups.



This equates to around **10 million adults**

using church-based provision outside of Sundays, Christmas, Easter and Harvest services or baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Services offered by churches include food banks, education centres, lunch clubs, community nursing, exercise classes, relationship support, financial education and advice, access to the internet, and providing opportunities for volunteering. The research highlights that the most frequently used services were children and youth provision, cultural events and activities for older people, but churches also provided support for asylum seekers, those with addictions, counselling and 'street pastoring'. In other words, the level of community activity among churches is huge.

As a result, the voluntary work offered by faith communities is recognised as being of enormous value to society, with UK churches giving 114.8m volunteer hours in social action each year; the equivalent of 63,077 individuals working full time.³⁴

The Church is a community whose beliefs make them altruistically motivated to take action to meet the needs of their neighbours and communities. This is great news for the children's social care system.

33. Spencer, N (2014) *Doing good: a future for Christianity in the 21st Century*; Theos; Available [online](#).

34. Jubilee+ (2010) *National Church and Social Action Survey 2010*



Church and Charities Partnering Together: A case study

Safe Families recruits, trains and supports volunteers from within churches to come alongside families in their communities who are overwhelmed by their circumstances.

Over 7,000 volunteers have been trained in the last 8 years, who collectively have supported over 15,000 children. This bespoke, volunteer-led support provides families with a sense of belonging and hope. Based on surveys conducted among these families, 93% of respondents reported experiencing a maintained or increased sense of happiness and mental wellbeing during the support period.



"Mary has been incredible. I felt like I knew her like an old friend, even though we'd never met. She was so aware of how I and my husband were, not just the children, and she helped us find time together in the midst of everything. The support was perfect for me and it was amazing how a chat could make the world of difference when we felt so alone."

Lena, Cardiff

Safe Families is committed to working with local authorities and Trusts across the UK to provide families with a sense of belonging and hope. By partnering with each of the 152 local authorities in England alone, we identify that 7,500 families could be supported each year through the recruitment, training and support of 16,125 volunteers. Assuming that the profile of families referred is consistent with what we are currently supporting, then 53% (n=3,975) of these families will be receiving statutory intervention at the point of referral. Safe Families support would see 90% (n=3,577) prevented from escalating further in Children's Services.

Applying the same logic, 47% (n=3,525) of families will be referred at the Early Help stage and of these, 90% (n=3,173) will be prevented from entering statutory services.



“You have helped me a lot. It has meant that I can keep Layla at home with me. Safe Families have left now; they’ve stopped giving us care because I don’t need it, really. I’m managing really well with Layla and everything that entails being a single, full-time mother. I owe a lot to Safe Families, you’ve done a lot for me.”

Lucy, Mum, Stockton-on-Tees

Where children can be safe and supported to stay with their birth family, then this is the best place for them to be. However, there will always be a cohort of children who are unable to remain living with their birth family, whether for a time or on a permanent basis. For these children, it is vital that there are homes with the right skills, in the right places, ready to welcome and care for them for as long as needed. However, the Social Market Foundation estimates that England is facing a shortage of 25,000 foster families over the next five years. In half of all decisions made, social workers have no choice in the foster home a child is placed in.³⁵ The care system is clearly in crisis.

35. Sinclair, I & Wilson, K (2003) *Matches and Mismatches: The Contribution of Carers and Children to the Success of Foster Placements*; *The British Journal of Social Work*, 33(7), pp.871-884

Church and Charities Partnering Together:

A case study (continued)

In response to this, **Home for Good** is committed to finding a home for every child who needs one. To do this, we are strategically mapping our engagement throughout the UK to reach churches in every village, town and city.

We know that by inspiring members of these churches to consider whether they could welcome a child into their home and heart through fostering, adoption or supported lodgings, we could make significant strides in helping the care system to provide children with the homes they need.

Since 2016, we have referred over 1,400 households to our partner local authorities and agencies, with our Enquiry Line receiving over 1,800 calls in 2020-21 from individuals and families considering fostering and adoption. We have developed a programme called the 'Foundations Course', which enables us to journey with these individuals and families over eight weeks. Between April 2020 and August 2021, we ran 32 of these courses across the UK, with 306 households in attendance. 68% of these attendees told us they were more likely to foster or adopt having completed the Foundations Course, with 99% saying that they would recommend the Foundations Course to others.

“We had talked about fostering for a long time, but doing the Foundations course with Home for Good really cemented for us that this was something our family could do, so we started filling in the paperwork. Less than a month after we were approved, we received a phone call about two-year-old twins who needed a home, who arrived at our door four hours later.

Since being part of Foundations we've remained connected with Home for Good and the support from this network has meant so much to us.”

Donna, Foster Carer



The impact of partnering with churches, as well as Home for Good's approach to journeying with people, has led to applicants who are better informed and prepared. One local authority found that Home for Good enquirers are **2.5 times more likely to become approved foster carers** than those who come through their own recruitment channels. Through engaging and journeying with thousands more of the 50,000 churches across the UK, we believe that many thousands of altruistically motivated individuals, couples and families will step forward to open their homes and hearts to vulnerable children. In addition to this, through our high-quality, bespoke resources, church environments themselves can become trauma-aware, supportive contexts for children and families where they feel welcomed and cared for.



“The children’s and youth leaders at our church were trained by Home for Good in 2016. Since then, they have been able to take some steps to make groups more inclusive for children with experience of care. They are much more mindful of how a child’s behaviour might be masking their attachment issues, anxiety or their inability to access what’s happening... The children had also experienced abuse and were very sensitive to any sort of contact. Leaders at church were understanding of these needs and were very careful with the children. This meant that ‘S’ and his sister were able to relax and be themselves in church. The training has permeated the culture of our church and people are generally much more aware of the issues facing looked after and adopted children and how to support them.”

Emma, Foster Carer

In addition, we recognise that the majority of children who enter the care system have experienced abuse or neglect. All will have experienced trauma. And yet, the challenges faced by children and young people as a result of this trauma do not end when they reach adulthood. Many care leavers and care experienced adults continue to deal with the legacy of this trauma throughout their lives. No person ages out of the need for a family or tribe to belong to and as such, there are many thousands of care experienced adults who need people in their lives who are committed to them over the long term. We identify that communities such as the Church are well-placed to provide this support over a lifetime.

Church and Charities Partnering Together:

A case study (continued)

“Belonging to a community of faith was genuinely an extension and probably more real in being a family to me at age 18 and 19 onwards. That belonging was hugely significant. That early year investment and faith community investment and belonging was huge.”

Care-experienced adult



Furthermore, we recognise that the system can struggle to take a fully joined-up approach, particularly when it comes to the recruitment of individuals and families to care for and support children and families.

THIS WAS RECENTLY HIGHLIGHTED THROUGH STATISTICS PUBLISHED BY OFSTED, WHICH SHOWED THAT IN 2020/21:

160,635
households
enquired about
fostering.



Only 6%
of these enquiries
went on to make an
application (n=10,145).



Of these
applications, only
2,165 approvals
were made.

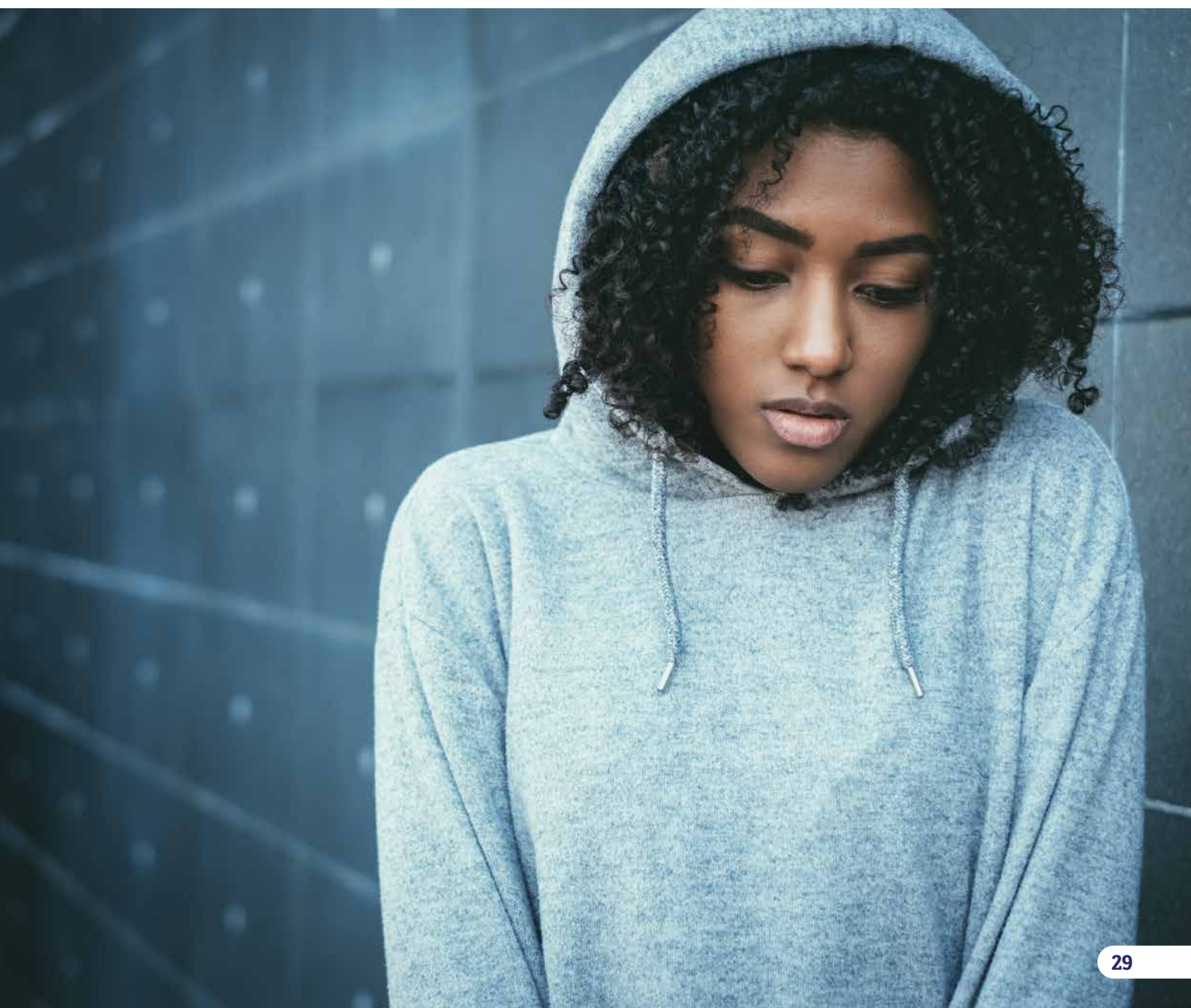


These statistics demonstrate that there is a significant interest among many within society to care for vulnerable children, but also highlights a shocking **1.3% conversion rate from enquiries to approvals**.

We are concerned that people who are positively motivated to care for children and families, and who take the step to enquire about one way of doing so, are being put off at the earliest stage. Not only this, but there is little evidence of them being effectively signposted to alternative options when foster care is not suitable to their life stage and capacity. A joined-up approach is needed across the system to retain these individuals and their skills more effectively, journeying with people to support them in considering what role they could play and signposting them to other ways of caring for children, as appropriate.

Within statutory services, pressures within specific teams can mean that there is limited capacity and incentive to journey with enquirers effectively. In contrast, voluntary organisations and the third sector can be better placed to journey with those seeking to play their part to explore what this could look like for them. As Home for Good and Safe Families, we currently signpost to one another regularly, drawing on the expertise of each organisation and directing enquirers to one another, as appropriate. We have a shared ambition to see children and families thrive and as a result, are motivated to signpost effectively where needed. We believe that this approach can more effectively retain positively motivated individuals within the system.

We are absolutely committed to ensuring the safety and flourishing of children and families. There are vital safeguards which must be in place and through churches partnering with organisations such as Home for Good and Safe Families, who themselves partner with local authorities, agencies and other safeguarding bodies, we are able to work together to enable this.



Conclusion

This report has set out four key attributes of the Church across the UK that mean that it is well-placed to make a unique contribution in meeting the needs of children and families within the children's social care system.

As Home for Good and Safe Families, we are committed to playing our part in harnessing these strengths to support vulnerable children and families. For the full extent of this impact to be realised, we urge national Government, local authorities and other statutory services to recognise the role that the Church can play and to proactively seek to engage with these communities. As organisations who work specifically to engage these groups, Home for Good and Safe Families stand ready to support Government and local authorities in working effectively with the Church.

Specifically, the Review of Children's Social Care in England should make the following recommendation to Government to enable the system to benefit more proficently from the potential within the Church and other faith communities:

National Government, local authorities and other stakeholders should partner with faith communities and organisations who work to unleash the potential of these communities, to address the crises in Children's Social Care.

By working together and harnessing the skills and motivation of the Church with renewed intention, we believe that we can enable every family, young person and child to experience the love, safety and stability they need.



“For churches or any organisation to step in and to wrap around our children to provide that support, local authorities have to create the space and take the time to build the relationships and the partnerships for them to do so.”

Ann James

Director of Children, Families and Safer Communities, Bristol City Council



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