

More than 4,000 Church of England parishes are estimated to have stepped up their support to local communities in the face of rising levels of poverty, loneliness and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic, according to new research published today.

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Church volunteers have carried out a range of tasks from food deliveries to shopping, dog walking and collection of prescriptions since the first lockdown, according to a report by the Church of England and Church Urban Fund.

Gardening projects, "phone buddies", job-hunting support, and helping people to get online were among a series of innovative services provided by churches for people suffering from the social and economic effects of the pandemic.

Despite restrictions affecting many projects such as lunch clubs and parent toddler groups during the past year, nearly a quarter of churches started a completely new activity during the pandemic, and more than half adapted two or more of their existing community activities in order to continue meeting the needs of their local community.

Overall, 37 per cent of churches reported that they were providing more support to their communities with this figure rising to 41 per cent in rural areas.

Food provision and pastoral support were by far the biggest area of support provided by churches, with nearly 80 per cent of churches involved in running or supporting a food bank or other similar services such as food clubs and hot meals. Many opened food banks for the first time in response to the economic fallout of the pandemic.

More than a quarter of churches, or 28 per cent, reported that they were working more closely with local authorities on projects such as emergency food provision.

Church leaders told the survey that social problems such as isolation, loneliness and mental health difficulties, food poverty, unemployment and debt have become much more widespread in their communities as a result of the pandemic, particularly in the most deprived areas.

Churches reported that church buildings, because of their size and ability to be well ventilated, had been used by local communities for activities including medical purposes such as ante natal classes and socially prescribed exercise.

In many cases Church buildings became symbols of hope, the report notes, and were adorned with flags, posters and artwork as a "form of visual outreach and encouragement" to local communities.

The report highlights examples of the community support provided by churches in the rural Cotswolds, south London, Leicester and in Birkenhead, Merseyside.

These include church services broadcast through a local community radio station in Leicester through to a voucher scheme set up in partnership with the village store in a rural community to help isolated people get the items they needed after the local bus service was stopped.

The Bishop of Newcastle, Christine Hardman, writing in a foreword to the report, said: "The unequal impact of the pandemic has made us more acutely aware of poverty in our midst, even in wealthier parts of the country.

"Tackling poverty is a fundamental part of the Church's mission. Despite the enormous challenges, many churches are living out their Christian faith by doing more to support their local community, offering help, advice and care for the most vulnerable."

Church Urban Fund Chief Executive Rachel Whittington said: "Extraordinary times, they say, call for extraordinary measures. 2020 was a year like no other, and yet - as this report demonstrates - churches across the UK rose to unforeseen challenges with undeterred compassion and unwavering determination, displaying the love in action which lies at the heart of the Christian gospel"

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Notes to editors :

- A total of 1023 Church of England clergy completed the online Church in Action survey in October and November 2020, with support from the Church of England's Research and Statistics team.
- The survey captured information on the social issues parishes are facing, how churches are responding to these issues, the unique challenges and opportunities that the pandemic has created for social action, and church leaders' concerns and priorities for the year ahead.
- The report can be read [here](#).

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