



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Twelve

Social Change: reducing inequalities in our society, and how the needs of individuals can be supported by the church and faith groups, government and the legal system without undermining the family unit

The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021 as the first major step in our inquiries. It provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people aged 18 and over, faith communities, and organisations working with children and families in England in thinking about some of the key issues relevant to the Commission's work. These are described in our first Briefing paper.¹

We are analysing the responses thematically and sharing the emerging themes through a number of discrete briefing papers. In reporting the emerging themes the Commission is not commenting on them at this stage, but simply sharing them with a wider audience while using them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that are taking place to dive more deeply into the evidence.² The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

About this Briefing

The Commission is examining the factors that promote strong relationships, stability, safety and sustainability within families and households, and the conditions in which children can thrive and reach their full potential. In previous Briefings we have reported on the main themes to emerge from questions relating to the meaning of family and the characteristics of human flourishing, family relationships today, and the issues facing children and young people.

In order to understand the challenges facing families and households today, the Commission is exploring the changes that have taken place in family life over time, and particularly since the Second World War. In Briefing Ten we reported on the key themes emerging from questions about the changes in family life, household patterns and living arrangements experienced by respondents to the Call for Evidence. In Briefing Eleven we reported on the

¹ *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One - The meaning of family*, March 2022

² *ibid*



themes emerging from questions about the impact of the recent coronavirus pandemic on individuals, families, children and young people. We also considered responses to questions about how the church, faith groups and government can support families to deal with the impacts.

In this Briefing we report on questions about how inequalities in society can be reduced, and consider how the needs of individuals can be supported by the church and faith groups, government and the legal system without undermining the family unit.

Context

The Commission began with a clear belief that families and households of all shapes and sizes should be places where people of all ages, cultures, faiths and no faith are best supported to thrive. We were also aware that inequalities in society make it more difficult for some individuals and families to thrive. So we wanted to know how the church, government and the legal system could assist in tackling inequality.

The coronavirus pandemic, which hit the UK in March 2020 and resulted in successive national lockdowns and a large number of deaths,³ has drawn increased attention to these inequalities. The interaction of racial, socio-economic, and health inequalities, and an increase in the risk of mortality among COVID-19 patients from UK Minority Ethnic/Global Majority Heritage groups, became more obvious as the pandemic continued. This trend resulted from inequalities in exposure to the social determinants of health, including the conditions in which people live and work.⁴

In 2021, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that millions of people already living in poverty prior to the pandemic were at increased risk of contracting COVID-19.⁵ Research has shown that Covid-19 has killed people in the most deprived areas of England at double the rate of those in the most affluent.⁶

³ Currently 183,000 in the UK (updated 22 July 2022); <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

⁴ Bambra, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J. and Matthews, F. (2020) *The Covid-19 pandemic and health inequalities*. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 2020;74:964–968.

⁵ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/low-income-and-deprivation>

⁶ https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/chart-of-the-week-covid-19-kills-the-most-deprived-at-double-the-rate-of-affluent-people-like-other-conditions?gclid=Cj0KCQjwzqSWBhDPARIsAK38LY8H5npmaLpWiv2kO07G5MYnhswrppM_q_MKxbPMIh6mjySaTdtZ_x0aAh9cEALw_wcB



These health inequalities were already well-documented some ten years earlier. In 2010, a landmark study⁷ had noted that:

‘People with higher socioeconomic position in society have a greater array of life chances and more opportunities to lead a flourishing life. They also have better health. The two are linked: the more favoured people are, socially and economically, the better their health.’⁸

The review concluded that reducing health inequalities is a matter of fairness and social justice and argued that ‘the fair distribution of health, well-being and sustainability are important social goals’.⁹ The review recommended action in six social policy areas. Ten years later, in 2020, the review team explored the changes since 2010 in five of these policy objectives:¹⁰

- giving every child the best start in life
- enabling all people to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives
- ensuring a healthy standard of living for all
- creating fair employment and good work for all
- creating and developing healthy and sustainable places and communities.

The 2020 review found that life expectancy in England had stalled since 2010. It noted marked regional differences in life expectancy, particularly among people living in more deprived areas:

⁷ Marmot, M., (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*, Institute of Health Equity: <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-exec-summary-pdf.pdf>

⁸ *ibid* p 3

⁹ *ibid* p 9

¹⁰ Marmot, M., Allen, J., Boyce, T., Goldblatt, P and Morrison, J.(2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On*, Institute of Health Equity; https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on?gclid=Cj0KCQjwIK-WBhDjARIsAO2sErTCIGHu6n7dcU8kCgJ0MpgC6dTIW7QyHVPPhIFrgHD4KDk0US0gHHboaAke9EALw_wcB



‘For both men and women, the largest decreases in life expectancy were seen in the most deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods in the North East and the largest increases in the least deprived 10 per cent of neighbourhoods in London.’¹¹

The period between 2010 and 2020 had been marked by deteriorating health and widening health inequalities and the review emphasised that ‘place matters’ - living in deprived areas significantly impacts on health.

Moreover, the 2020 review pointed to the increases in child poverty since 2010, and stressed that poverty experienced during childhood not only has harmful impacts on child health but also that these impacts continue throughout life. The Children’s Society has reported that some 4.3 million children in the UK are living in poverty and have predicted that this number will increase to 5 million this year.¹²

The current escalating cost of living crisis in 2022 places increased focus on food poverty. The Trussell Trust reported that their network of food banks distributed 61,000 emergency food parcels in 2010/11, rising to 1.9 million in 2019/20.¹³ The Trust’s statistics show that the proportion of couples with children referred to a food bank increased from 19 per cent in early 2020 to 24 per cent during the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-2020. People referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network prior to the pandemic were already a very deprived group: ‘almost everyone (95%) met the definition of being destitute’,¹⁴ 75 per cent were described as being severely food insecure, and one in five were homeless. The majority of people experienced two or more types of deprivation. There is clear evidence that the coronavirus pandemic has served to increase the problems associated with poverty.

Given the increasing social and economic challenges in our society as we emerge from the depths of the pandemic, the Commission is exploring how the church and other faith groups, and how the government can assist in reducing these inequalities. We look first at the responses to the Call for Evidence about the role of church and faith groups.

¹¹ Ibid Executive Summary

¹² https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty?gclid=Cj0KCQjwzqSWBhDPARIsAK38LY-FyKx6sH7zmE5RnKEUpml5aTUNXy8LFiv1RPR3C7738GZC2op5XjlaAmbMEALw_wcB

¹³ Bramley, G., Treanor, M., Sosenko, F and Littlewood, M (2021) *State of Hunger Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK*, The Trussell Trust

¹⁴ Ibid



In what ways can the Church of England and other faith groups assist in reducing inequalities in our society?

The vast majority of responses were consistent in the view that the church and faith groups have an important role to play in helping to reduce inequalities. Just a very few expressed the view that the church has no place in this endeavour. The following comments typify this small group of responses:

- *I do not think the Church of England can do this. It does not have the resources, skills or knowledge to do so. It also has its own significant issues to do with inequalities (e.g. the discrimination of homosexuals, women, and people living with disabilities). It also does not recognise and support its own staff and clergy with protected characteristics or support them ...*
- *The opulence of much of the Church of England does not signal a commitment to social equality*

The majority of responses, however, contained ideas about the role the church and faith groups can play, and a number of key themes emerged as to ways in which the church and faith groups might assist in reducing inequalities.

Speaking about inequality

One of the main themes from the responses is the need to talk about inequality more openly:

- *Bring light to them ... I feel that we are too quick to judge. Preach and talk about actual issues! Stop skipping over the things that are hard to talk about. ... We can all realise that we are all completely equal in God's eyes ...*
- *Speak out clearly and loudly against racism, bigotry*
- *Speak out and address inequalities in our society and not shy away from difficult issues that cause it*
- *Speaking up for fairer systems and valuing people's work roles in the front-line services. Campaigning for a changed system to look at 'growth' in our economy (alternative to GDP) that considers human values and wellbeing not just monetary values. Speaking up for those communities and groups that are undervalued and not*



fairly recompensed. On a practical note for example; setting up opportunities to 'share' things e.g. specialist tools and equipment, allotment/growing crops...

- *Stronger teaching about why social action and social justice issues are faith issues - how the Christian faith calls us to act upon injustice wherever we find it. Better tools for community organising and activism - greater focus on alleviating root causes of inequality not just mitigation of the results of inequality. Greater focus on working WITH communities of deprivation or experiencing inequalities, rather than doing FOR them. The C of E speaking up centrally against inequality and unjust systems - against women, the poor, LGBTI+ people, refugees/asylum seekers. Encouraging church members to be people who fight for justice and equality in all the different spheres they're in - in business, schools, politics, within their community groups*

Campaigning and advocacy

For some people, speaking out about inequalities also involves actively campaigning and advocacy:

- *Speaking up for those who no voice*
- *Activity, Advocacy and Activism in such areas as poverty, education, housing, access to services*
- *Campaign on behalf of unseen groups, such as older women, ... who have much to offer society, or raise awareness of the Female Autism Phenotype, which helps many women to understand the cause of their anxiety and depression and consider what to do about it*
- *Telling the truth about inequalities, not fearing political backlash*

Challenging government policies

Campaigning about inequality included suggestions for challenging government to do more to support marginalised and deprived communities:

- *Encourage the government to treat everyone equally as God treats us equally. Not 'money for the rich and ignore the poor'*



- *Firstly it is the church's responsibility to point out inequalities and the impact wherever they see it and it should be a multi-faith effort. Then they should lobby Government to sort it out*
- *Work for justice in ALL areas of life - don't just talk about it. Stand up to the government*
- *[Putting] pressure on government through the House of Lords and the House of Bishops and changing the attitude of the Church of England from remaining quiet on issues of social need ...*
- *Push the government more, take a stance as an organisation and publicise it*
- *Lobby government for a more equitable tax and benefit system*
- *[Provide] emotional support as well as things like food banks etc. Provide advocacy and support for people who need it, whether it's help with administration or support at meetings or literacy support. Anything that reduces inequality*

Some people were keen to see income levels increased for the poorest in society and also considered how this is manifest in the church:

- *We have all taken advantage of cheap labour, including the Church of England. For as long as we are happy to pay people the minimum we think we can get away with, we are as implicated as anyone else. And justifying paying cleaners low wages because clergy and bishops also receive low wages compared to similar secular jobs is also not acceptable. Perhaps if we were honest about our part in perpetuating inequalities, and our regret that we cannot afford to remedy it by paying more, we might be better listened to?*

Providing direct support for people

The majority of respondents talked about ways in which the church and faith groups could provide direct support to tackle inequalities alongside advocating for change:

- *Following on from COVID, the church might dedicate its resources to identify community needs early and intervene effectively and compassionately. Much of the time this is already happening within faith communities, through the existing work of the Church in things like food banks, or similar. In future, resources should be used to embrace wider ways of operating that will allow faith groups to 'swim upstream' and*



provide earlier assistance, and to challenge the situations of injustice which lead to inequalities. Alongside the potential of the Church to use her buildings and people time, the Church also has an immense institutional power to influence for change. So, for example, calling for a cash-first approach to food poverty

- *We can tackle inequalities in the earliest years through reducing adversity facing some families (i.e. by addressing poverty and poor housing) and by supporting early relationships and positive interactions which are critical for early development. The Church and faith groups can provide direct services and support to help with these things (e.g. supportive baby and toddler groups) and can also use its voice to campaign for change*

- *Identifying those who would most benefit from support and creating welcoming opportunities for people to engage. ... Large area statistics can hide issues of deprivation, for example in country areas. The Church needs to be alert to this and respond at local levels of need. Church schools can also play a role identifying those families where inequalities feature*

- *Be more involved in the community. Vicars should hold surgeries, drop-in sessions for people who are struggling. Utilise the venues within the church estate to provide practical support*

Several responses advocated using church land and church buildings to support equality initiatives:

- *Build houses on Church land and make it affordable and only make enough profit to maintain properties and relationships and invest in more similar projects. Cut down on the ridiculous levels of expense re church buildings and administration by training and providing teams of people to serve one another at a reasonable cost*

- *[The church] could open up the thousands of church-owned buildings to the many looking for somewhere to live*

- *Sell off [church] properties and invest money into housing strategies*

- *Sell some of the land and buildings the church owns and invest in affordable social housing for low income people*



Modelling diversity and equality

One of the key themes from the responses referred to the church and faith groups being able to model diversity in order to reduce inequalities. The following detailed responses spells this out:

- *Model equality - 1) Take an honest look at your leadership and the extent to which the mix of backgrounds reflects the congregation and society as a whole ... ; 2) Run inclusion and diversity programmes to increase awareness and understanding of the key issues and create a road map to move from "some of them" to "all of us". Jesus said the world will know we are His disciples when we love one another and become one. The gospel is the most inclusive message - for anyone who believes. The church must lead the world in modelling diversity with genuine inclusion, but we have this badly wrong; 3) Review key processes around recruitment, selection, performance appraisals, promotions with the intent of removing inherent biases; 4) Become intentional about connecting with traditionally marginalised groups ... including [UK Minority Ethnic/Global Majority Heritage groups], LGBTQ+, disabled etc.; 5) Run focused listening sessions with individual minority groups, hear the different voices/stories and develop meaningful programmes to build bridges; share the Gospel and help them encounter Jesus and the love of God for themselves; 6) Become intentional about having people from diverse backgrounds reflected in the congregation and throughout leadership by discovering the obstacles and bottle-necks and addressing them, including additional training and support for marginalised groups where necessary so they can have equal access to opportunities; 7) Run relationship building programmes to increase communication, understanding and the ability to build relationships across difference*
- *Churches have an important role to play in providing a safe and accepting community where all groups are treated equally. Modelling equality is often the most effective way of challenging inequality. This requires leaders to be aware of their own unconscious biases and the need to be working to be as inclusive as possible. Where people can experience positive relationships, and see difference being handled with sensitivity and a desire for understanding they are more likely to develop and practice those skills themselves, and make a difference in their own school or workplace. Educating ourselves and campaigning about injustice, including poverty, racism, child and domestic abuse and disability issues, is also important.*

For some people, modelling diversity and inclusion would involve actively learning more about inequalities and leading by example:

- *Stop 'doing to' deprived communities and start learning about them and their values. Recruiting more widely and not allowing privately educated Oxbridge clergy to remain in Ivory towers and actually get some lived experience which is deeper than*



mere tokenism and actually challenges their classism. Making sure our leadership comes from a wider pool of backgrounds

- *Actively talk about and champion social justice, engaging in this with a clear theological underpinning. Model reducing inequalities, prejudice and exclusion within the church. Offer a different model for action, addressing social justice, guided by the Holy Spirit, rather than trained professionalism*
- *Make the moral imperative the economic case. Model the behaviour and selfless generosity we want to see*
- *Leadership by example. Honouring everyone and seeking to ensure this is expected of others. Train people in understanding difference*
- *Lead by example and model equality in every decision and policy from top down*

Promoting inclusivity

Modelling diversity also involves promoting inclusivity in the church and faith communities:

- *Avoid cliques in church. There is no "in crowd", especially of the leadership. There should be no exclusion of people from house groups or leadership positions on the basis of health, including mental health. Equality of opportunity must be seen: set a good example and then others will see how we love one another - "by this will all people know that you are my disciples"*
- *Far greater acceptance of 'difference' as normal in faith groups, much less righteousness and judgment. Christians are good at preaching, fasting, praying, worshiping, reading the bible, giving... but peace-making seems not to be a core value of most churches and is not practiced. It should be*
- *By showing what equality is in all actions and the work undertaken within communities. By treating all as equals as well as talking about it. Being totally inclusive*
- *Stress the needs of the poor, welcome them into church, go out of your way to provide food and services that can help them, never turn them away from a church service, no matter what condition they are in*



- *Provide opportunities for individuals to grow, serve, love, whatever their background, and be the place where diversity is expected, so that people can learn from each other*
- *Within our own congregations, breaking down barriers that prevent all people worshipping will enable the body of Christ to be truly diverse and unified. There is a long way for us as churches to go and probably starts with a change in mind-set/culture, but viewing all people as made in the image of God and churches as places where all nations and peoples of all backgrounds gather as God's diverse people is a first step in enabling barriers (whether race, sexuality, disability, class) to begin being dismantled*

A few responses referred to the importance of recognising and valuing disabled people:

- *Value disabled people; meet their needs, not just as people who need things doing for them, but as individuals who can also bring value and be active participants, and leaders. Twenty per cent of the population has some kind of disability or additional need. Where is this reflected in our churches, in church leadership, in decision making bodies within the C of E, or in any of the major UK Christian organisations, festivals, conferences, etc.? The church is lagging way, way behind in disability equality, and this isn't biblical or legal. Most other organisations and institutions are taking this seriously. Media, sport, entertainment, education, etc. are all way ahead. In many cases the church isn't even giving observance to the Equalities Act. Many/most churches are still not accessible, even at the front door, let alone inside. Why is the C of E clinging to old, unsuitable buildings over the needs of those in the communities they serve?*
- *Treat families of children with SEND just as you would anyone else. And allow gay marriage. By stopping all forms of prejudice. We all hear about race equality, gender equality, equality for those in the LGBTQ+ community and even to a degree those with physical disabilities, yet having a learning disability reduces your life expectancy over twenty years. That should not be the case in this day and age. More needs to be done to protect those with learning disabilities*

Summary

The answers to this question revealed a range of constructive suggestions for how the church and faith groups could be supportive in reducing inequalities. These ranged from providing direct support for marginalised groups, using church buildings more imaginatively, actively challenging government policies, to modelling diversity and inclusion in everyday life. Importantly, there is considerable support for taking a faith perspective on reducing inequalities:



- *Teach more on this issue from a Christian/faith perspective! Raise awareness of inequalities in churches that often don't accurately reflect local or national demographics (C of E congregations are often largely 'middle class') and encourage members to take action and be informed. Lobby government on issues that can reduce inequality. Support other organisations that are working to reduce inequality. Think about how the national and local church uses its wealth/investments and set an example to follow*
- *Prioritizing some of the neediest areas ... those areas identified as most at need or most deprived. The C of E already has some great people working and volunteering in these places, and it is hard work ... and frustrating that the church resources (people, training, money) seem to be funnelled into the latest trendy project, and not to where there are big inequalities. It would be great to see more partnership with other local agencies where appropriate, maybe even with other faith communities. Our local Sikh temple has been giving out hot food in the pandemic, we have been running a foodbank - but I wonder what we could do together?*
- *[Churches should] share their resources much more... not keep churches just for Sunday service but be hubs in the community*

In what ways can government and the legal system assist in reducing inequalities in our society?

We also asked about how government and the legal system can assist in reducing inequalities. Many respondents to this question commented that they had found it a hard question to answer because of the enormity of the task. Some others were critical of the current government and could not see how the government could assist. The following responses were typical of this view:

- *May be if MPs had to live off basic universal credit , pay rent, council tax, heat their home, and eat they may just start to realise how difficult it is for those who are the most unequal in our society. Sadly I feel that those who make policy have no clue at all what life is like for the lowest paid. Get rid of zero hours contracts, do they realise how difficult it is to budget if you have no idea month to month what you will be paid!*
- *Stop having public school educated twits in high office*



Nevertheless, most respondents made suggestions for change, primarily relating to government policies rather than via the legal system. These suggestions included the importance of government having a better understanding of the inequalities that need to be addressed.

Having a better understanding of the problems

There is a consistent theme throughout the Call for Evidence about the need to have a better understanding of the difficult and challenging issues facing families and households:

- *Both institutions [government and the legal system] need to understand the problems experienced by the poor and disenfranchised. Government are too pre occupied by their own comfort and lifestyles. They seem to have no idea about what it's like to be poor, homeless and to live without hope. The legal system should be accessible to all. The extortionate charges make justice inaccessible to the poor*
- *When creating policy and law look at it from the point of view of those who are more disadvantaged and how it could impact them or help them. Invest in our communities in a way that values people's time and talents and not just their money earning capacity*
- *The government should go and experience the life that people who are struggling live. I don't think many have the understanding as they never struggled. They need to speak to people without judging them. Understand how the benefits system affects people*
- *By seeking to understand life in the "Real World" outside the SW1 postcode*

The importance of being less judgmental was also highlighted in many responses:

- *By becoming less judgemental and more supportive*
- *Promoting tolerance, compassion and support for those who need it most*
- *Having a more compassionate heart for the most vulnerable in our society. So many of the people we see have "fallen through the cracks" of the government support, and these days, you need to be well-off and well-educated, with access to a computer, just to be able to access any help, or to shout loud enough. Seeking to support people, rather than penalize them*



Giving people a voice

Several respondents talked about the importance of giving disadvantaged people a voice in order to understand the issues they are facing:

- *Give people a voice, and not just the usual people you would give a voice to. Listen to people*
- *Listen to the concerns of those who often have no voice, the poor, the vulnerable and the disadvantaged!*
- *Listen to people and their needs. Create systems that have the welfare of people in mind (not finances!)*
- *Lobby government for the protections at work and protection of incomes, education and health, that can enable all to flourish regardless of their family circumstances, but also reduce the pressures that split families apart*

Increasing investment in support for those in need

The most prominent theme emerging from the responses related to the belief that the government should increase the support for individuals and families in need:

- *Support the vulnerable, and help by making things easier to access and understand, not everyone has access to or is efficient with using everything on-line. Some people need a kindly person to sit down and explain and support them through things, especially reams of paperwork or online questionnaires!*
- *Government needs to continue to invest in those services such as Supporting Families, Reducing Parental Conflict, Start for Life, so that those who would most benefit from support can access it easily, without stigma, and ensure we walk alongside families for as long as it takes*

Responses referred to housing, income levels and social care as needing more investment, and wealth being shared out more fairly:

- *Do something urgently about the cost of housing which in some parts of the country makes renting/buying unaffordable for many people. Take action to discourage people from buying property as investments that may just sit empty. Ensure access to good education and training for all whatever their background. Reduce opportunities for tax loopholes/evasion so that the tax people pay is more proportionate to their*



income/wealth. Consider ways of redistributing wealth that is not punitive but encourages a fairer society

- *[Make] universal credit as generous as possible; tax breaks to ensure children are fed Put proper support and reform in place for the least well-off and celebrate kindness not greed ... in all policy decisions*
- *Return the uplift in Universal Credit*
- *Support those unable to find work and those on low incomes*
- *A complete overhaul of social care and welfare is needed, to enable disabled and vulnerable people to engage with society in meaningful ways*
- *More funding for addiction services, mental health support, homeless support, and more funding for adoption support and therapy for anyone who needs it*
- *Wealth should be shared out more - the gap between rich and poor is too big. Work to root out betting and gambling companies from ruining communities ... Prescribe church rather than anti-depressants*

Changing policies

Many respondents recognised the need to change some existing policies in order to increase support:

- *[We need] change in policy, better social care and other services, a better benefits system*
- *By introducing a true levelling-up policy and programmes which address inequalities and provides a society for everyone ...*
- *Making policy decisions with the primary aim of benefitting the marginalised and poor not the rich and powerful. Better social security system. Supporting community groups. Creating programmes that funnel people from a broader selection of backgrounds into politics. Strengthening education and routes into work, particularly for the most disadvantaged. Providing more support and methods of alleviation for those who enter the legal system - what is their context and so why did they commit that crime? How might those things be addressed? When people enter the criminal system, there needs to be more support for rehabilitation*



- *Make misogyny a hate crime. Effectively police violence against women and children. Pay a living pension especially to women. Support schools in dealing with bullying, misogyny, hate*
- *Put finding into social care, social support, mental health*
- *A living wage – people should not be dependent on food banks when we are the sixth wealthiest country on the globe. Provide more funding for mental health support.*

Several responses highlighted the need for legal aid to be available in family law proceedings:

- *Making access [to the courts] fair. Legal aid cuts, especially in family court cases, simply divide families further and prevent better opportunities for families to remain connected if not together*
- *Making legal aid available to all who need it*

Providing leadership

A number of people argued that tackling inequalities in society requires strong leadership from government:

- *Government could put its own house in order and show respect for the electorate by upholding standards of good behaviour in public office. When there is a lack of clear leadership people feel insecure; there is increasing stress and a resulting increase in social disorder*
- *Ensure that those who struggle the most are not continually let down. Constant worries over money and support networks being withdrawn add to household stress*
- *The Government and the Cabinet must be seen to be making policy with equality as the central principle, including sacrificial changes to their own financial rewards*
- *Government's job is to share the wealth so that the "lost, least, and broken" do not fall below a threshold where flourishing becomes inhibited. This comes through adequate support and the encouragement of true opportunity for growth. The legal system needs to maintain justice, and to hold the balance of competing "rights". Within that framework, parental rights, and care of children are of great value*



Summary

There is clear consensus that many policies need to change if inequalities are to be tackled and that this will require political will and leadership. There is also a call for better understanding of the root causes of the inequalities and of the lived experiences of those who are marginalised. The voices of those living in deprived communities and difficult circumstances should be heard and responded to without judgement.

There is little doubt that those who responded to our Call for Evidence regarded our questions as important and challenging:

- *That's such a big question. It's hard to imagine. It requires such a shift in the structure of our government and a re-imagining of the health, community/housing, education and mental health services which are disjointed, lacking cohesion and inherently imbalanced in its power, that any one answer would be naive. Somehow balancing out that power, by giving more voice to minority communities, and faith communities as well as strengthening partnerships between governments and community organisations could be a start. Playing an active role in reducing poverty and helping all families have an adequate standard of living would help too*
- *This is a huge question - there are so many ways that this needs to be addressed: a) we need a Government that works for the many not the few; b) we need to re-balance the economy and reduce the gap in incomes; c) services, including access to justice, need to be driven by people's needs and not the ability to pay*
- *This is a difficult question. I think a place to start is to be committed to being concerned for those who are poor and vulnerable and finding ways in which to place them at the centre of our national life, rather than consign them to the edge*

For many people the challenges require greater public awareness of injustices and a bolder vision of what the future could be:

- *Create awareness of the injustices and costs of exclusion; 2) Ask honest, tough questions ...; 3) Create a bolder vision of an inclusive society and the benefits of creativity, productivity and national health that comes from empowering every demographic across society to bring the best of themselves, access opportunities on offer and make a positive contribution to society; 4) Stop being lazy in our thinking and action - vigorously discover the obstacles to full participation being experienced by each traditionally marginalised group and remove them; 5) Address bias and injustice in the police force; 6) Address bias and injustice in the legal system; 7) Unlock the potential in marginalised people by helping them access the promoters of wealth - education, home ownership, business capital etc.*



Some people commented on the lack of joined-up government which means that key policies such as those relating to families that separate are not owned by any one department:

- *The government needs to promote a public education campaign for parents to co-operate with each other following separation, where safe to do so. All that is offered is the open door of court, thereby adding fuel to the fire of the hurly-burly of separation. The needs of the separated family fall between many government departments and so there is no policy or provision for them*

Thinking especially about individuals, in your experience how can their needs within a family be supported by the Church of England and other faith groups without undermining the family unit?

Context

While exploring inequalities in our society today and the challenges facing families and couple relationships, the Commission has sought to understand how individuals living in a family group can be supported without undermining the family unit. Individual family members may experience a range of issues such as mental or physical ill-health, disability or abuse, for example, all of which require access to specific support for the individual concerned.

One of the greatest threats to flourishing family life is abuse within the family which challenges the integrity of the family unit and the wellbeing of the individuals within it. In recent years, various social movements have shone a spotlight on this issue, resulting in increased focus on the needs of individuals. For example, the 'Me Too' movement against sexual abuse, sexual harassment and a rape culture, which gained increased publicity on social media in 2017,¹⁵ aimed to empower people who had experienced sexual abuse through the provision of empathy, solidarity and strength in numbers, especially for young and vulnerable women, by visibly demonstrating how many have experienced sexual assault and harassment in a range of environments. More recently, the key purpose of the movement is to give people the resources to have access to healing, and to advocate for changes to laws and policies.¹⁶ Abuse which takes place within families is especially

¹⁵ The phrase "Me Too" was initially used in this context on social media in 2006, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MeToo_movement

¹⁶ Leading with empathy: Tarana Burke and the Making of the Me-Too movement, (2020): <https://case.hks.harvard.edu/leading-with-empathy-tarana-burke-and-the-making-of-the-me-too-movement/>



challenging since it severely threatens both individual and family flourishing, shatters trust and frequently leads to relationships disintegrating and families breaking up.

With greater awareness of the issues which can inhibit individuals from flourishing, the Commission has wanted to understand the impacts, explore how individuals and families might be supported and ways in which the church can play a role in this. In Briefing Two, we reported on the answers to our questions about individual and family flourishing and noted that there are potential tensions between the factors promoting individual flourishing and those which encourage families to flourish. We reported that there were differences in the way respondents described family flourishing compared with individual flourishing:

‘While the specific characteristics of individual flourishing focus on the self, the ways in which everyone should be able to pursue their own goals and achieve personal happiness and fulfilment, family flourishing is primarily characterised by the individuals in a family working together to achieve mutual security, and a happy and fulfilled family life. Respondents recognised that in order for each individual and the family in which they live to flourish, there are usually tensions which have to be addressed.’¹⁷

Respondents to our questions recognised the challenge: - ‘retaining one’s individual identity can be difficult within a family group and requires a range of skills, a sense of give and take, shared values and a mutuality of purpose. Nevertheless, the majority of people felt that it is possible for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts.’¹⁸

- Where a family is able to function in a way that enables each individual to flourish and be supportive of each other to achieve 'their best', the sum of the parts is often greater than the individual parts. A flourishing family will be able to meet more than their own family needs but also have capacity and gifts which they are able to offer to wider society. In order to achieve this, more than their basic needs have to be met

There are clearly circumstances where individuals and families are unable to flourish, where the stresses and strains in daily life and within relationships are overwhelming or toxic, but these experiences are often hidden from public view. Having asked questions in the Call for Evidence about how the church and the government can address inequalities, we went on to ask about how the needs of individuals within families can be supported by the church and faith groups while protecting the integrity of the family as a whole wherever possible. We record the responses here.

¹⁷ Archbishops’ Commission on Families and Households: Briefing Paper Two

[https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/briefing_paper_two_understanding_the_characteristics_of_individual_and_family_flourishing.pdf)

[06/briefing_paper_two_understanding_the_characteristics_of_individual_and_family_flourishing.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/briefing_paper_two_understanding_the_characteristics_of_individual_and_family_flourishing.pdf)

¹⁸ *ibid*



Some people clearly found this a rather difficult question to answer. A few people expressed the view that the needs of the family are more important than the needs of individuals within it:

- *The family unit is more important than the individual*

A few others were unsure how providing support to individuals could undermine a family unit:

- *I cannot see how support for individuals can EVER undermine the family unit. It might change the dynamics sometimes, but this is not the same as "undermining" the family unit.*

Some others thought that the church does not have a role to play:

- *I think the church should stay out of this*

The majority, however, were sensitive to the challenge of supporting individuals and their family. They suggested a variety of strategies for supporting individuals:

Listening to individuals and understanding their needs in relation to others

Many people emphasised the importance of listening to the individual and attempting to understand each person's needs within the context of family life:

- *By listening, and perhaps asking people to face up to the consequences of their actions on others*
- *Have drop-in centres where people can talk, pray*
- *Listening to individuals confidentially*
- *Love. [Offering a] non-judgemental place of acceptance. Place where people can talk, listen and learn who they are and who they'd like to be*
- *The biggest thing is just making every individual within the family feel they have a voice. That what they have to say/what they feel is important and people want to hear it*
- *A chance to have a safe space to talk, express frustrations and celebrate achievements. Somewhere else to support each other*
- *Churches can offer useful listening provision for individuals, hopefully in a trusted and safe environment where an individual can seek support externally from the church family that is not undermining to [their own] family. Also churches can offer targeted*



provision/support for people in different situations that is additional and complementary to family support e.g. a group for those with memory loss/dementia, or a group for their carers, or for those recently bereaved

- *[Offering] quiet gentle support, listening to real needs*

Providing resources for individuals who are struggling

Some responses referred to the provision of a range of resources when individuals are struggling:

- *The church has many resources and properties that could be used to support those struggling within local communities. Night shelters, soup kitchens, clothing banks. Mental and spiritual support*
- *Provide support to help individuals deal with their family*
- *Embrace difference; be willing to hear about the realities without passing judgement; giving people that love within the church, will help and support people to go back to their families to tackle the challenges there with more understanding*
- *Just knowing people are there to meet needs as they arise, a helpline to provide shopping or pick up meds would be amazing, really demonstrating service to the community*
- *This is best exemplified by support when the family of old or vulnerable people live further away, or were restricted in travelling due to COVID, where the Church can stand in and provide personal support for people with the consent of their more distant families etc. Obviously the same for those with mental health issues as well. In terms of groups providing general social support, as long as these are additional to statutory ones, or in recognised replacement of them, this shouldn't damage most family groups*
- *Counselling offered by the Church could be good, and fellowship groups to encourage friendships especially amongst those struggling with mental health. Also good children's groups who care about the parents as well as the children. Stay and play groups and Sunday school*



Understanding needs

The importance of understanding individual needs was emphasised in answers to this question as in answers to the previous question. In order to offer support to individuals, many responses talked about the importance of fully understanding their needs, often within the context of family and everyday life:

- *No one functions or malfunctions in isolation. When an individual struggles so do others. Helping everyone as needed is the best help. Asking them and their family to meet with someone from the church can help them decide what help is needed and help it be tailored*
- *... learn about their culture and religions to provide the necessary support, according to their level of education*

However, most people thought that this is best achieved by working with the family:

- *By working with families to identify the support they need, not imposing the support we believe they should have*
- *Through communication and discussion with the family to find out what their needs are and how they can be supported either by the church or they may need more professional help*
- *Treat every individual as part of a family whether they are single or not. Not to make assumptions about families but see each family as unique and each individual within that family as unique*
- *Include the family in making decisions whatever the age of the individual. Provide support so that individuals can access help/groups/courses/social activities etc. (Safeguarding issues are very important)*
- *You must work with the family unit, taking family members out and treating them as individuals without the support of the family will cause more harm than good*



Providing activities for different age groups

Some respondents suggested that the church should tailor its activities to meet the needs of people within different age groups:

- *Appropriate group activities for different ages and needs do not undermine the family unit*
- *By offering unconditional support in community cafe's, family support groups, youth groups, all with a focus on showing our Christian spirit in action rather than forcing people, to whom a Church is alien, into our faith patterns*
- *Invite them [individuals] to participate in an activity which is appropriate to their interests and does not impinge timewise with family time*
- *We need to keep offering a variety of services/events where all or a variety of people feel welcome. So things for families; things for children (to give parents a break); things for individuals to come together without feeling like they are the only one*
- *Create opportunities for the children, the mums, the dads. See them as individuals and not just as a family unit*
- *Events and activities should be promoted to support individuals separately and as a family*
- *Provide opportunities for families to do things together as well as groups for individuals, and balance these types of provision*

Supporting parents

A few people suggested that parents need support:

- *Providing high quality parenting support and activities that engage the whole family including fathers. Making sure the church fulfils its social justice remit by walking alongside those with the greatest challenge and need*

Summary

The majority of responses to this question suggested that individuals could be supported by offering a listening ear and different resources to meet the needs of different age groups.



No-one referred to the kinds of issues that threaten family functioning such as domestic abuse or serious mental health issues. However, some did acknowledge that there are situations which make supporting individuals more challenging:

- *Set up support without judgement - include everyone without expectation of what a family unit should look like. Sometimes confidentiality issues get in the way of supporting individuals when different organisations can't share information*
- *Recognising the variety of peoples' family and intimate relationships is supportive; supporting LGBT [sic] relationships for those who are LGBT does not undermine those in straight relationships and more traditional families. It celebrates the diversity of family life which reflects the diversity of the humanity that God has created*
- *There is a lot behind this question! I don't necessarily see the two as mutually exclusive ... families are a dynamic system no matter how broken they are. Even when the individual may challenge the family unit because of their role, sexuality or identity - the whole family unit needs to adjust to a different understanding of who they are. God still needs to work redemptively in each of their hearts to learn what love means in the details of their family life. When one person in a family struggles the whole family struggles and needs to adjust. Even when one wants to cut themselves off from their family, that becomes difficult - they still exist as a member of that family and are held in the minds of others in that family. Working with the whole family (with permission) is the ideal. However there are cases where working with an individual is necessary, and where it might be 'wise' to actually undermine the family unit in order to protect an individual*

There were some comments about the need to place family flourishing as the top priority:

- *Flourishing for all should be the priority - when the most marginalised groups flourish, then all can flourish. The C of E also needs to recognise same-sex relationships to include broader family groups without them feeling unwelcomed and excluded. The C of E's current line about same-sex relationships cannot be said to support LGBTI+ individuals, families, or couples - by continuing to have a conservative/orthodox theology of marriage and gender, it is saying that other expressions are wrong or broken - this is not equality or even welcome*

There were also pleas to see faith as an individual belief and to recognise singleness:

- *People's faith is an individual thing and this should be accepted. Don't assume that everyone in a family feels the same*
- *Offer the benefits of a family unit by providing that as a church community rather than expecting individuals to fit the family unit model, because they don't and it's*



alienating and lonely to be made to feel like you are not good enough for God constantly

The following response captured a range of suggestions about how the church can help individuals without undermining the family unit:

- *Support the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of individuals with programmes for the different ages (adults, young adults, teens and children); 2) Offer role-related training/support to equip them to be great partners, parents, teens, young adults, recover from divorce/separation - in tailored groups to allow them to share challenges and learning; 3) Offer teaching, support to boost resilience and godly confidence in the younger generation so they can navigate contemporary issues successfully - bullying, anxiety, gender fluidity, sexual orientation; 4) Teach godly money management; 5) Provide tailored groups to teach people to be single well and discover their purpose in God so they don't look to partners for personal meaning and fulfilment; 6) Provide education and support to strengthen relationships and communication; 7) Provide outreach to the LGBTQ+ community to repair the damage done by the church over the years and build bridges so those families can also hear the gospel and experience the love of Christ*

Thinking especially about individuals within a family, in your experience how can their needs be supported by government and the legal system without undermining the family unit?

A number of respondents to this question were firmly of the view that the government is not in a position to support the needs of individuals or families. The following comments were typical:

- *Complete mayhem in terms of government and law. Britain has only clowns in power. Legally the family courts are in complete disarray*
- *Reduce interference, demolish the nanny state, and abolish secretive family courts*
- *Government can't do anything. They are out of their depth*

Nevertheless, other respondents offered clear suggestions about what the role of government should be:

- *The Government should be there to support families, while accepting it has also security and infrastructure responsibilities, and to define the law. The standard form*



and algorithms are the greatest risk to families as individual characteristics and needs may be overlooked

- *[Government should] decentralise resources: one size does not always fit all. Understand individuals within the context of their family unit which may or may not be able to offer support itself*
- *The government and the legal system should recognise the primacy of family units in all but the most extreme safety situations*
- *Government supports the family unit through access to universal health and education and security. It utterly fails the family unit when it pretends that all family forms are equal and perversely penalizes formal commitment by withholding huge amounts of tax credits from couples who live together*

A number of people commented that they found this a difficult question to answer and were unable to make a distinction between individual and family support. Consequently, the majority talked about how government should do more to support both individuals and families. A number of key themes emerged from their responses as to what the government could do.

Providing better support for parents

One of the dominant themes to emerge was the call for better government support for parents. The kind of support being suggested was very varied and attention focused on a few issues, including: maternity/paternity pay, health, education, parental rights and taxation:

- *Provide better maternity pay so women can afford the basics when they have children; provide paternity pay and support paternity leave so fathers are strongly encouraged to be involved; develop policies around flexibility so parents (not just women) can manage a career while raising a family; provide more pre-school support so parents can return to work; provide back-to-work transition programmes for the main care-giver (women and men)*
- *Parental rights need to be respected. Provision of support for children, just like in education, should be seen as a form of "partnership" with parents, resourcing parents to care for their children rather than [the government] caring for children directly*



- *More financial support or less taxation for families would help. [Provide] subsidies on school uniforms*

Several responses referred to the need for better support to help families stay together:

- *Much more support is needed in keeping families together and offering parenting support which doesn't feel judgemental. Adoption is difficult and challenging and may not be the best answer if enough funding can be put into supporting families to thrive and flourish*

Increasing access to supportive housing

A number of respondents referred specifically to the need for supportive housing:

- *More housing with support should be built for the elderly to encourage them to move from family homes so that more homes are accessible to families. Young people have suffered a lot during the pandemic, more affordable social housing needs to be built around supportive accessible services. The church and state used to be more proactive in supporting local communities, now it seems it doesn't exist or it is left to charities who are also struggling to cope*

Increasing the provision of mental health services

Very many responses called for better funding for and increased and speedier access to mental health services:

- *A lot of stress in families is caused by health issues. The government needs to support the NHS and Social Services to provide fast treatment and better long term care for those who need it*
- *Early, and genuine support and intervention for those who need it. This needs significantly more funding, but it could save an absolute fortune in the long term, particularly if you take into account the adult mental health problems which are being mitigated against by supporting them as children before they develop*
- *Mental health is a problem , many sufferers end up homeless or in prison because they can't cope*
- *The government has a role to play in providing funding to resource mental health support Providing funding to teach parenting and relationship skills is also important, but offered in a learning environment where it can be interpreted within*



the culture of the family, as long as that is within the bounds of safeguarding concerns

- *One big issue for us is when children with mental ill health are taken away from their family to be detained in assessment and treatment units that are like prisons, isolating and restraining them without any support, understanding or human rights. So many autistic young people have been through this. Also a complete overhaul of the residential care sector for disabled adults [is needed]*
- *Proper timely access to GP, mental health services, social services, addiction services, refuges etc.*
- *Much more support of mental health needed. CAMHs need more funding*

Reforming the social security system

There were very many calls for changes in the social security system and better welfare provision:

- *Stop penalising poorer people with benefit caps and policies which make it difficult for families to survive*
- *Give the right support to the needy: money, homes, care for the elderly*
- *Increase universal credit, increase community centre and family centre use again. Improve social services and family support workers*
- *My proposal is that we aggressively increase provision for home-based childcare— e.g. financially enabling family members, nannies, au-pairs etc.--to care for children in the homes of their families. Currently, many of the available resources exclude this kind of care*
- *Implement a living wage that is meaningful; sick pay for self-employed people; benefits which people can live on; and give people dignity as they go through the systems*
- *Spend taxes on citizens, like family support systems; more money for schools; free education; universal credit that is actually enough to live on; more libraries; more (affordable) public swimming pools, sports facilities; more youth activity offers; and introduce a mandatory living wage*



- *Families struggling financially need a better social security system and support balancing work and family life. More people need access to listening support and counselling. Young people need access to mentors and counselling*
- *An adequate welfare state, with education, healthcare, adequately paid work and benefits for those in need - plus employment rights that recognise and protect the need for work-life balance - will support all citizens and enable them to provide better support for families and avoid the stresses that cause families to break down*

Reforming the legal system

Alongside calls for reforming welfare provision were some calls to reform the legal system:

- *Family law needs serious reform and resourcing, some people have awful and re-traumatising experiences as a result of the legal system*
- *Address all kinds of violence against women and children very robustly*
- *[Introduce] further legislation and reform to prevent violence against women on the streets and domestically*
- *Make misogyny a hate crime. Put money into the law and court system so that perpetrators of violence within the family can actually be prosecuted.*
- *Sometimes the legal system is needed to support individuals within a family, so that more vulnerable people are protected. For instance, intervention is needed, and needed in a timely manner, when there is domestic or child abuse*
- *Access to justice is now not easily available to everyone. The legal aid system is much smaller and harder to obtain. Many cannot afford to pay for legal advice. Advice services are not always available in all areas, especially in the more rural areas. This needs to be addressed*
- *Abolish NRPF [no recourse to public funds], reform the legal system around domestic abuse and sexual assault, [and provide] legal aid for everyone who needs it*



Several responses referred to the need for better support when parents are in danger of splitting up:

- *Provide support early on. In my experience parents who separate need support early on to avoid conflict becoming entrenched. Providing Parenting Programmes, Mediation, and Child Contact support for free early on in [family law] proceedings would avoid lengthy court cases*
- *We need to make sure that when parents separate they are able to deal with their emotional conflict in ways that do not create vulnerability in their children. Separating well and parenting co-operatively should be promoted through the family justice system. Children mostly have two parents that when not together can still function well for the interest of the child. The opportunities to join up work with families across government should continue*

Recognising singleness

A few people urged greater recognition of singleness and the situations in which being single is penalised financially:

- *Individuals should not be penalised financially - so many areas of expense add on charges for individuals - such as holidays; also benefits should not be dependent on 'family' situations*

Summary

The majority of responses to this question urged government to increase the support for families facing financial pressures which are increasing in the current economic climate, and to ensure that support services are more readily available, especially to address mental health issues which have increased during the COVID pandemic. Several people indicated that the challenges are likely to increase:

- *I think the financial pressures on families are overwhelming and that is being exacerbated by increases in utilities and fuel*

These realities led respondents to call for greater investment to reduce inequalities and poverty:

- *There are government systems in place which inhibit families from thriving. One example accessing services – thresholds are set higher by councils in poverty areas and therefore families miss out on important support needed. Poverty is not an inevitability, it is a social construct and until government understand how their*



policies can be changed to be equal for those suffering the consequences of living in poverty...

- *More counselling needs to be available for those struggling with mental health. Those on low incomes need support to ensure they have the right size house; and opportunities to have breaks from each other to be their own person but also to be able to do things together that aren't prohibitively expensive e.g. family days out (and public transport needs looking at!) but also more opportunities for learning - access to sports/dance/music/art classes to do as a family or as individuals*

Respondents who focused on the needs of individuals pointed to the importance of listening to everyone and offering individual and targeted support where necessary:

- *Making sure the individual feels supported and listened to, making sure the individual has a mentor or somebody that can support them outside of the family unit*

Professor Janet Walker OBE

July 2022