

Reaching out

Findings from a survey of social action in our parishes in Lent 2019



Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political...

It makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of charity.

(Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 231)

It's time for the Church to tackle the epidemic of social isolation, a new survey in Nottingham Diocese has revealed. Alongside care for elderly people, isolation topped the list of concerns which parishes felt Catholics could help to address.

The questionnaire was circulated just before Lent to clergy, with lay people often involved in the research. Responses have so far come in from about half of parishes, and more are on their way. The evidence is proving to be invaluable, so if you have contributed your insight to the survey, thank you. Already a picture is emerging of the wealth of social action going on in our parishes. Here's a preview of those findings.

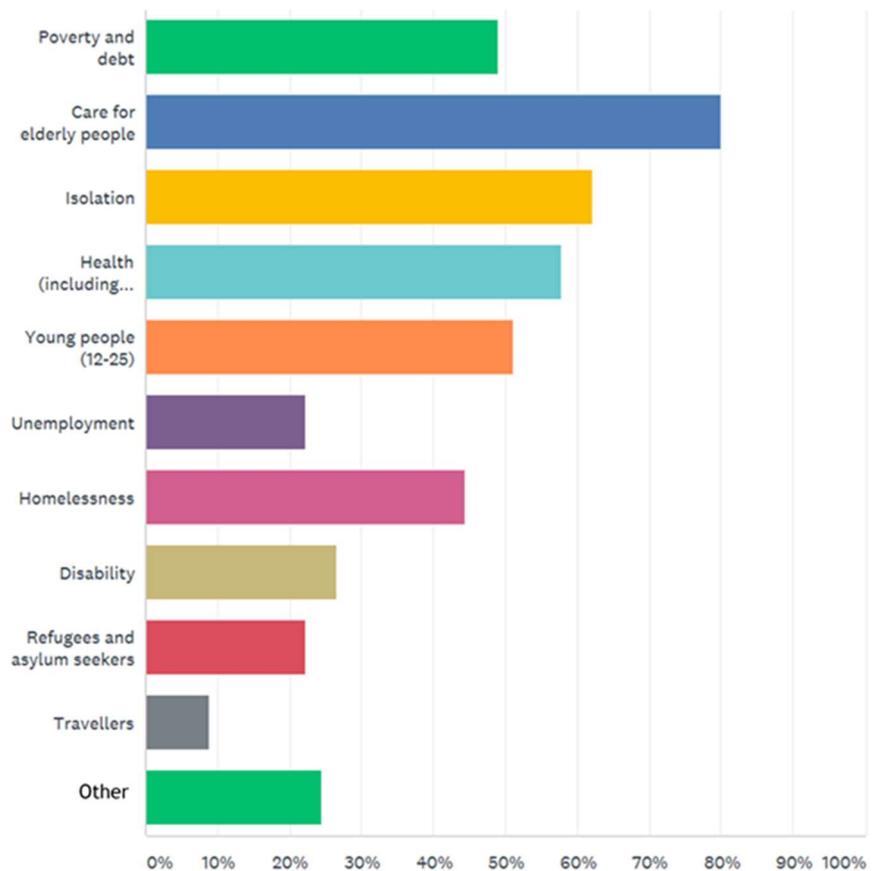
The first main question asked what social outreach projects and activities the parish is already involved in. Three-quarters report working directly with members of Traveller communities, and also with parents and children, elderly people and young people. Many parishes also have active volunteers who support SVP (75%) and CAFOD (86%), with over 60% of respondents saying they are working towards CAFOD's Livesimply Award. Over half of parishes reach out to people with disabilities (67%) or prisoners (52%). A similar proportion report an active commitment to Fair Trade. Nearly half (42-47%) take practical action to care for the environment, reach out to seafarers or people with mental illness or dementia, or offer marriage counselling.

For some activities, parishes are more likely to work with other churches and agencies in their neighbourhood. Half of parishes collaborate ecumenically for Justice and Peace issues or to help refugees (compared with 30% doing it themselves). And over half (57%) contribute with other churches to a local foodbank, to work with refugees or on environmental concerns. Parishes often support other organisations which provide the expertise, notably with pro-life services (62%) and homelessness (48%), in addition to the vulnerable groups mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The questionnaire also enquired about activities which the parish is beginning to develop. The Livesimply award and environmental concerns, dementia and Justice and Peace are attracting most attention, between 40% and 25%.

Looking to the future, the survey also asked 'What do you consider the main concerns to be addressed in your locality?' As reported above, top of the list were care for elderly people (82%) and isolation (62%). At least half also cited health (including mental health), poverty and debt, and the needs of young people, with homelessness not far behind at 44%.

The diocesan social action survey in Lent 2019 revealed that care for elderly people and isolation are the main concerns which parishes want to see addressed in their locality.



The Friendship Group at St Patrick's in Leicester combats social isolation. Every week it welcomes people regardless of faith, and not just from Beaumont Leys but from across the city.

(Image from a film by Imran Qureshi)

So what can we learn from the responses so far? The evidence shows that Catholics are doing much valuable work already, and that hands-on 'missionary discipleship' deserves to be sustained and strengthened. And there is an appetite to do more to meet the additional needs the survey has brought to light. The Justice and Peace Commission will be organising Deanery workshops through the coming year to explore the potential for collaboration both within and between parishes.

And it won't stop there. Thanks to a grant from Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN), we will be able to help all these aspirations to bear fruit. With CSAN's help the Commission is planning to strengthen charitable work across the diocese under the umbrella of the nationwide network of 'Caritas' agencies. It's all set out in the remit for **Faith into Action**, outlined in the May 2019 edition of *Catholic News* and available online at www.dioceseofnottingham.uk/faithintoaction.

Many of the problems of our time hit the ground in Nottingham Diocese, and claim our compassion. The survey results hint that the crisis of loneliness is a problem we are poised to tackle. Unlocking it is a matter of both justice and charity – it reconciles people with each other, and enables them to claim their God-given dignity.

With the volunteers and meeting spaces at our disposal, the Church is well-placed to tackle social isolation among people of any age. The problems are complex, but the solutions are simple. And for us the motive power will be God's love, searching, generous and unconditional.