



Engaging with your local authority and other partners

Lessons learned and recommendations



Introduction

What are we talking about when we talk about engaging with the local authority as a church? Is it like a kiss, where we stand in splendid isolation and only come together when absolutely necessary? Or is it more like a rugby scrum, where we grab hold and shove together? It might be messy, cause some friction along the way, but we are all working together to achieve the same goal.

Over the years many of the churches in Commission in different nations have experienced the joys and some challenges of relating with different organisations, for varying periods on diverse issues, in keeping with their church vision. These have ranged from working with local councils focused on very specific issues to partnering with very well-known international development agencies.

In this short guide for church and project leaders we outline the benefits and challenges faced by churches when working with local authorities, discuss key lessons and principles learned along the way, and conclude with a case study and personal reflections of working with the local authority from one of our UK churches.

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The overriding principle

The most important principle when considering engaging with local authorities is that we should not compromise who we are as the church (the Bride of Christ), ensuring we maintain our Gospel focus, righteousness and purity.

We must therefore ensure that we don't lose our identity and our unique Christian distinctive. It is important to consider our position as the local church as a unique organisation, with a unique mission (Matthew 28:18-20). We need not be fearful of this; but should seek wisdom in how we relate to, and work with others. We should not compromise who we are to achieve partnership. Being as wise as serpents and harmless as doves is vital...so we can scrum down and push together, but not lose our identity.

What are the benefits when working with local authorities and partners?

We need to take notice that recognised bodies have many positives, which can help us to fulfill the mission that God has given us. Here are five key benefits to working with local authorities and other partners:

- 1 **Working with others can help the church punch above its weight**, and implement ministries that would otherwise have been difficult to achieve but part of the vision of the church. We have seen this many times in the UK and India.
- 2 **Local authorities have skills & experience.** Most public bodies or contracted bodies have excellent training, which is current and comprehensive. They have experienced most situations and will have policies and procedures that cover most occurrences. As a result they may be able to sort issues out quickly. Often we will be able to access training and make use of best practices as they have already been developed by the local authority.
- 3 **We can become aware of the needs** of the town from a different perspective, often which have been previously unfamiliar (e.g. serving those with HIV/AIDS). This allows our capacity to show compassion and allow potential to emerge and be enlarged. Our experience is that the church then engages at a new and higher level in terms of prayer and volunteering.
- 4 **Gaining trust** as the church works together with a local authority or partner can open doors for the future. This enables us to develop our ministries further for greater impact, or scale up so that there is greater reach. We have seen local authorities become more open to facilitating church outreach. For example, setting up a prayer tent at a local food festival after spending three years simply serving on the festival team picking up litter. This simple act of service helped the church gain trust through which the church was able to then be more open in its witness.
- 5 **There is an opportunity to share the Gospel**, pray for people, and through serving gain recognition in the town or city, whether by council officials, school authorities, local politicians, health services or Police.

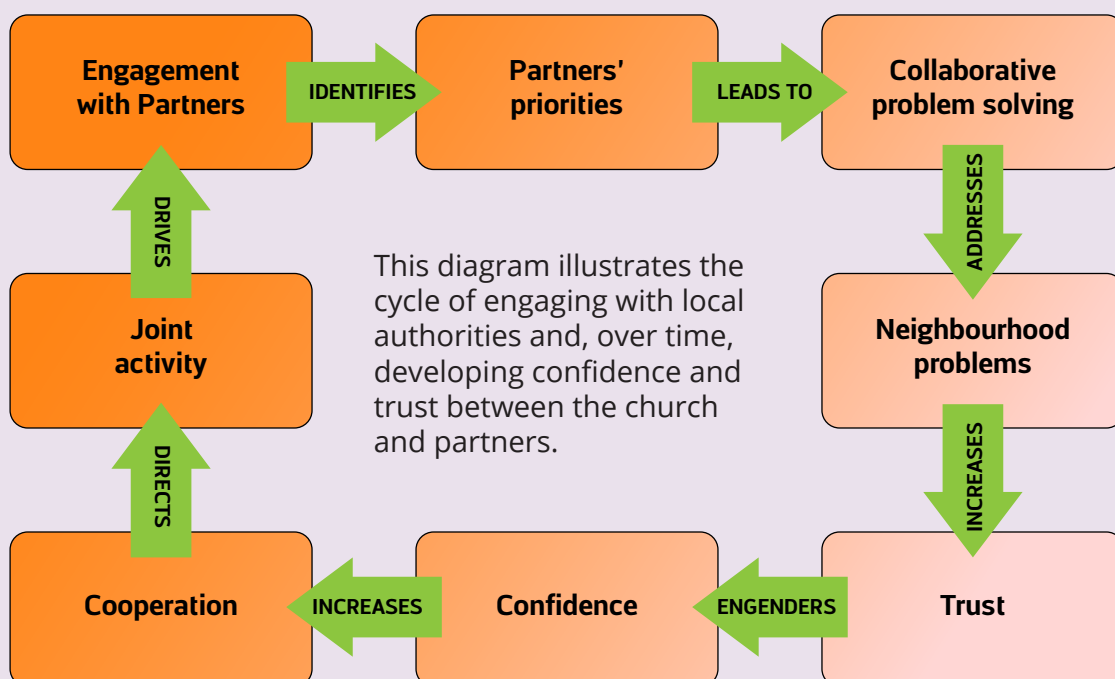


And the challenges?

- Local authorities may not have power invested in them:** they have powers of arrest, powers to take children into care, powers to require people to accept drug treatment. However they don't always have a power that you might want them to have. For instance they cannot make a person live in a warm home and eat three meals a day.
- Or they may not want to get involved at all.** For example, a case of civil trespass or a domestic dispute may well be something that we think the Police should be involved in, but often they will not have power, or it may not be their policy to deal with the situation in the way that we think they should.
- Local authorities may also not have resources:** agencies such as the Police may well be able to call on people and equipment at short notice, however sometimes an agency may have nothing to offer. Out-of-hours social services would be an example of a service that is often stretched beyond breaking point.
- There can be a compromise of values** over time where even being sensitive, showing compassion and upholding the dignity of those being served is affected negatively. We have seen this happen even in apparently similarly minded partner organisations. Early recognition and addressing this issue sensitively with those in authority and leadership in our partner organisations in our experience is vital.

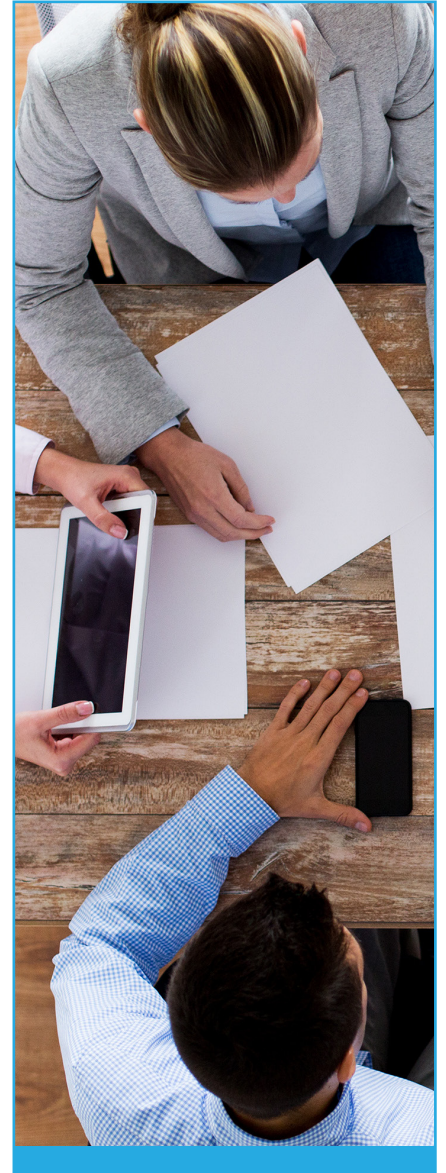


The Confidence Cycle



Key points we have learned

- Building relationships take time** - Trust is not born overnight but comes over time. We will often start by performing small tasks well, maybe passing on a piece of useful information, keeping an appointment or just attending a meeting that we are invited to. Tenacity and patience are vital. Trust is built over years not months.
- Be clear on your aims, priorities and limitations** - beware that there are many good ideas, but not all of them will be God's purposes for you or your church. What resources do you have, and what don't you have? Money? Volunteers? Expertise? Training? What will you need to do what you want to do well? How could other organisations or the local council help you (bearing in mind the overriding principle above)?
- Know the aims and priorities of potential partners** - if your work is going to help them achieve their aims, then they are likely to be more positive towards a partnership, and more likely to help fund your work. Therefore be wise in how you approach local authorities and ensure that you understand their perspective and priorities for the area.
- Listen and talk** - this may mean attending meetings and receiving email circulations so that you know and understand the position of the potential partner. Hear their issues. Consider what do you think are likely to be stumbling blocks to working together. Is religion a problem? Is faith a problem? Are they frightened that you will be proselytizing or discriminatory?
- Build a bridge** that will take the weight of your project - bear in mind that if you let people down it will be many times harder to build a relationship next time – start small, and do it well.



- We may need to form particular structures**, such as Charitable Companies, to manage some of our work, especially where the partner cannot be seen to engage with a religious body or where there is a considerable liability for trustees of the church as a charity. Sometimes we will be obliged to form a particular structure as this may be a condition of government authorising our activity. However, we don't want to move this structure outside of the church, because ownership will decrease and potentially open up the work to our church values being watered down, which we have seen in the UK and India.
- Look at an organisation's vision statement and core values** to help you understand what is at the root of their culture. You can then see how your own values match and begin to prepare statements and language that reflect the similar values, without of course compromising your own identity and mission.

- **Be aware of how some of the values that you take for granted** may seem very strange and ring alarms bells for those who you are attempting to engage with. Being prepared beforehand can help you think how you might address such concerns.
- **Finally, be aware of your language.** Use of words and phrases that we might consider very ordinary in our Christian context can sound foreign and even antagonistic to others, and can often be mis-interpreted. Saying 'we want to come and serve the town' is far better than saying, 'we want to invade this culture with the Gospel!' While we understand what we mean, others may not.



Case study 1 – Weymouth Family Church

Establishing a pop up Saturday evening Street kitchen

What was the issue?

We found that there was a gap in free food provision for homeless people in our town with nothing provided from Thursday morning to a Monday night. It was also found that there was an increase in robbery and antisocial behaviour during this time.

In our initial planning we selected an early Saturday evening as the night that would best address this issue. Our plan was to spend an hour gathering street homeless to provide them with a substantial meal, clothing and friendship/signposting services that would tide them over until the Monday evening. We approached both the council and local police to ask their permission to operate and engage with their knowledge and experience to help find a venue that would best serve all of our purposes.



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How did the local authority respond?

Initially we met with resistance. Objections ranging from, “there is no homeless problem according to official statistics”, to public and team safety, legal section 47 requirements, policing targets and priorities, and concerns that we were creating a focus that could attract more of a problem were posed to us.

However, through ongoing meetings and respectful conversations we demonstrated a heart to be part of the solution to the problem, and that we were actually aiding police and council strategic objectives and priorities, rather than worsening an issue. Finally, we were given permission for a trial and small beginnings.

Learning more before getting started

To find out more and find a potential location I was given a police car and escort of 2 officers and taken for an hour around the town to where the hot spots of problems or known gathering of homeless people were. This involved individuals in skips, in sea front shelters, in bushes in gardens/walls behind public properties, public underground toilets and shop doorways.

This wasn't what I had envisaged or what the officers on the frontline felt they should be engaged with on a Saturday night; yet we obeyed and prayed. A pivotal moment occurred when in front of the officers a single heroin addict trying to sleep underneath a public sea front shelter said loud and clear, “if you really want to help us love – ditch the officers – no one will come whilst they are your shadows”.

We went back to a review meeting with several lessons learned:

1. The official head counting method of determining homelessness in the town was flawed. Weymouth had a problem with homelessness and people were hungry and on the streets. It was quite a hidden problem but one well known to the police.
2. That the homeless community responded well to my presence and were willing to engage.
3. That it was time consuming and ineffective going to where pockets of people and problems were covering a large geographical patch
4. That a controlled gathering would be more effective use of all our time and resources.



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Preparation

The police and council then agreed a prime slot in Weymouth town centre - well-lit and covered by CCTV. We were helped with risk assessments and policing priorities. We were offered a police visit presence at a distant on standby and a link community safer neighbourhood officer to help with issues on a day to day basis. We trained the team regarding submission to the law of the land, safeguarding procedures, management of drugs and alcohol on site, dangerous dogs, and awareness of public safety and concerns whilst we were in operation. We also engaged the council with regards to food hygiene compliance and won a waiver to parking fees. We were then able to launch!

Working together to see more impact

Over time we have frequently aided the police both with specific enquires, management of the section 47 principle and "Operation Bear" – a local initiative addressing public drinking and disorder. We have demonstrated outcomes alongside our local street pastor initiative with a clear record of lives changed and moved from severe antisocial behaviour to steady stable and productive contributors to the community. We have also noticed a reduction in the need to gather at night and cause problems within the night time economy, intimidate rob or steal, if well fed early on and people dispersed to a place of safety to sleep.



In all this we saw the favour of God - not only were we able to successfully gather the very group we wanted to target, but we did so in a place that gave us a shop front window. A hidden problem became a public problem, and we quietly were able to raise this issue whilst demonstrating that the church in conjunction with the police and council were seeking to address the issue. We have long held multiple conversations with both passers-by and the friends we serve. Furthermore during time of challenge the Police and council have become our greatest defenders.

Benefits of building a good working relationship over time

More recently a secular Facebook group has been set up to help the homeless which had no engagement with local authorities and has a strong politically aggressive tone. The result was chaotic gatherings and a rise in anti-social complaints and public disquiet. A meeting of all homeless projects was called by the police and council with a view to disbanding all projects. Twelve weeks of meetings resulted in our project being the only named project given permission to remain.

The police and crime commissioner is considering whether to offer funding to the project and the council is openly trawling its books for vacant buildings and relevant properties that might further serve us well. At the end of one meeting with secular authorities we were invited to "pray if we wanted to" to close the meeting because they thought that's what we might like to do and had been too polite to ask!

Case study 2 - Pauline Wilks

A personal reflection on working with the local authority

Safety concerns

I was aware that fundamentally we wanted to befriend and work with those who are lost, hopeless, and thrown away by society. However, amongst those we wanted to work with, we would at some point statistically come into contact with people with psychopathic personalities (estimated to be around 4% of the homeless population).

Equally we would have on the team well-meaning, but equally vulnerable volunteers who would be naïve and very trusting, and prone to acts of friendship that could prove high risk. In essence the least qualified, i.e. volunteer groups, come into contact with the most dangerous of society. We have worked hard on training, developing and maintaining safe boundaries and ensuring the team are cared for well through regular de-briefing and support.



Potential language and culture clash

As a church we have language of family; befriending and inclusivity and forgiveness. We open up our homes and very much do life together. We are also keen to share our faith. Authorities have codes of conduct and in some cases professional statements that govern working relationships and practice. Likewise they live in a politically correct and sensitive culture where the vulnerable must be protected from overt influence and radicalisation. There will therefore inevitably be an initial clash of cultures and concern when we talk about our vision and purposes.

Recognising this however has helped ease the initial tension and helped us maintain our Christian distinctiveness. We have been clear that while this is a church initiative there is inclusivity of all faiths and none to utilise the service, there is an opt-in to things such as prayer and church invitation rather than a requirement in order to receive food help and clothing, and we have established safe working boundaries. Overall this has given us permission to share the gospel. This is being as wise as serpents and gentle as doves.

For more information, contact office@commission-together.org.



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