

## BRIEFING NOTE:

# LIFE EXPECTANCY WIRRAL

## HOW CHURCHES ARE TACKLING LOCAL INEQUALITY

**Life expectancy varies by up to 11 years across the five-mile wide Wirral peninsula - a pattern that is mirrored in many other parts of the country. As Christians and churches, how do we feel when we see these vast differences in health and opportunities and what can we do to stop this injustice? It was in response to these questions that the Bishop of Birkenhead and the Diocese of Chester set up the Life Expectancy Wirral programme in 2009, with funding from Church Urban Fund. This innovative and ambitious programme brings together churches from wealthy and deprived areas to engage with these issues and to begin to tackle local inequality.**

### BACKGROUND

The Wirral peninsula in the North West of England is an area of great contrasts, with significant deprivation on the east side and relative affluence on the west. One alarming measure of this contrast is life expectancy: a man born in a deprived community on the east of the Wirral can expect to live for 11 fewer years than a man born in an affluent community on the west; for women, the difference is 6.5 years. It was on learning about this disparity that the Bishop of Birkenhead, The Rt Revd Keith Sinclair, established 'Life Expectancy Wirral' in conjunction with the Diocese of Chester.

### LIFE EXPECTANCY WIRRAL

A central objective of the Life Expectancy Wirral project is bringing parishes together from deprived and wealthier areas in an equal relationship, with common goals and a shared commitment to learn from each other. The specific aims of the project are:

- To raise awareness of the nature and extent of poverty on the Wirral, and how this contributes to differences in life expectancy;
- To highlight to churches the biblical imperative to address poverty;
- To enable churches to respond to these issues in a long-term and sustainable way;
- To capture the learning and potential for replication elsewhere.

Two parishes took part in the pilot study - one from a particularly deprived area of Birkenhead and one from a relatively affluent area in West Wirral (see table overleaf). Four more churches have since been paired up and seven more churches are keen to participate in future pairings. Small groups from each church are guided by a facilitator (who can be a trained volunteer) through a five-stage programme to

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learn more about local deprivation, find out about each other's areas, and examine biblical perspectives on poverty. Initially, the two groups meet separately, before being brought together to share experiences and work together to address the issues they have identified.

	Heswall (West Wirral)	Bidston (East Wirral)
% of children in poverty	5%	56%
% of adults dependent on benefits*	9%	61%
Life expectancy at birth (men)	80 years	69 years
Life expectancy at birth (women)	84 years	78 years

\*In receipt of one of the key working age benefits: JSA, IS, ESA/IB or Carer's Allowance

### ATTITUDES TO POVERTY

The initial reaction of participants is one of shock at the levels of poverty in their local area. As the sessions progress, the facilitators have noticed a marked shift in attitudes towards those living in poverty. In early discussions, some participants feel that whilst those living in poverty may not be at fault for their situation, they are not helping themselves by the lifestyles and behaviours they choose: *"Our aim should be to re-educate children and young people about priorities - for example, not spending all their money on renting flat screen televisions."*

Having completed the sessions, however, discussion becomes more focused on understanding the difficult situations that people are in before judging them: *"[We] shouldn't make judgements about people who spend money on cigarettes and big televisions. They may be the only source of pleasure in a dark life."* It is acknowledged that in order to understand and relate to people and their circumstances, it is necessary to get to know them first. And there is a growing recognition that people's expectations, opportunities and experiences severely limit or alter the choices available to them. The story of Sophie and Jessica has proven to be a very effective tool for exploring these issues (see box opposite).

Through the sessions, it has also become apparent that church partners have more issues in common than originally expected, including the widespread loneliness reported by church members living in both deprived and wealthy areas, particularly among older people.

Participation in the programme gives people an opportunity to relate their Christian faith to the world around them. This has led to discussions about the difficulty of reflecting God both in poverty and in wealth, and the need for people to develop their own relationship with God to help them to see Him in others and to feel His pain for those living in poverty. Some people have stated that their faith has been challenged and strengthened through their involvement in the programme: *"It's grown my faith in ways I could never have imagined."*

Last, but not least, members of wealthier churches have to go through the 'pain' of not being able to fix the situation for people in the deprived areas they are paired with, which is always a temptation for middle-class professionals who are used to solving problems: *"We need to be careful not to assume that we know what other people want. We need humility and to become child-like ourselves - not to try and impose our ideas."*

The research team has prepared a four-page workbook ('Understanding the Language and Nature of Poverty'), which can be used by groups or individuals, to consider the language we use and the attitudes we hold when thinking about people who are experiencing poverty. To download this resource free-of-charge, go to: [www.chester.anglican.org/dev/docs/social/Language\\_and\\_nature\\_of\\_poverty.pdf](http://www.chester.anglican.org/dev/docs/social/Language_and_nature_of_poverty.pdf)

## SOPHIE AND JESSICA

This is a story about two little girls – Sophie and Jessica. Both of them are full of potential for joy, creativity, compassion, energy and wonderful relationships with those around them. Their Father knows this because He created each of them to be like Him. He gave them the ability to hope, to dream and to imagine the futures they would create for themselves. Then, He put both of them on the Wirral peninsula with abundant good things for them to share and many people who know and love their Father. However, from even before they were born, their lives were heading in totally different directions...

...Their Father knows about their different journeys better than anyone else. He knows the sadness and the bitterness that grew in Sophie as her dreams were sometimes crushed. His heart is broken when he sees how Sophie has struggled with illness and depression, and He bursts with pride at her successes. He's overjoyed to see Jessica fulfilling her potential, and is angry at the injustice that means that Sophie is never given the same opportunities. He knew that they both had so much to contribute to their local community, but also that their community is so divided that their experiences within it would be very different. This is not fair, and their Father is angry. He is asking those who hear Him today to do something to stop this injustice. As Christians and churches who want to hear His voice, do we feel His anger...?

*(This is an extract from an illustrative story used as the basis for one of the facilitated sessions.)*

## PRACTICAL OUTCOMES

***"I am so glad that we have more churches pairing together across the Wirral and, as we learn in this second phase of Life Expectancy Wirral, I believe God will show us how to develop Christian communities in such a way that they will be a real blessing to the wider community. That is our calling and, though the task and numbers may be great and our resources seem to be few, there is a precedent that in Christ's hands loaves and fishes can do far more than we could possibly ask or imagine."***

The Rt Revd Keith Sinclair, Bishop of Birkenhead

Having completed the facilitated sessions, the joint groups are encouraged to identify and plan a number of actions – for the short-, medium- and long-term - to improve life expectancy in the more deprived community. In the first pilot in Birkenhead, the achievements so far include:

- Wider community events to encourage the local community to engage with support services: for example, the Health Action Team were invited to attend the church's Summer Fair to give advice and basic health checks to people that the Team would not otherwise have met;
- Strengthening the local church in Birkenhead so it is better able to respond to poverty: for example, there are plans to upgrade the church kitchen so that it can be used to provide healthy eating cookery courses and budgeting advice to young people in the local community;
- Proposals for a shop in Birkenhead to provide a safe space, a listening ear and debt advice for the local community. Other ideas being considered include providing mentors to primary schools in deprived areas and developing a Park Pastor scheme to encourage people to make more use of green spaces;

In addition, the feedback from participants is that many have been challenged by the process to think differently about those living in poverty and have been motivated to do something about the inequalities

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that exist on the Wirral. In one of the second-phase pilots, the minister has already noticed a breaking down of barriers between the church and the community, with the church hall being made available for aerobics classes and a group of church members committed to prayer-walking around the local estate.

A resource pack has been created for volunteer facilitators to use in future church pairings, which has been modified in response to an evaluation of the pilot. Lessons have also been learned about the best way to manage successful partnerships between churches (see box).

### WHAT MAKES FOR AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH PAIRING?

- Full commitment and support of a representative from each church: this could be the church leader or another church representative (e.g. pastoral worker or member of leadership team);
- Group members to be well informed about what the programme involves, to be committed to attending the facilitated sessions and to stay involved in the longer term;
- Backing and support of the rest of the congregation;
- For both churches to understand that there is no 'quick fix' solution: participants need to be active listeners/learners and spend considerable time building relationships, firstly with each other and secondly with their local community before any major actions can be undertaken;
- An awareness that the relationship between churches is not one-sided and that both groups benefit in different ways from the partnership.

To find out more about Life Expectancy Wirral, please contact the lead researcher, **Wendy Robertson** ([wendyerob@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:wendyerob@yahoo.co.uk)) or visit the web page at: [www.chester.anglican.org/page\\_csr.asp?Page=336](http://www.chester.anglican.org/page_csr.asp?Page=336)

### CHALLENGE

Our own research ('The Web of Poverty: Area-based poverty and exclusion in England') highlights the vast inequalities that exist between deprived and wealthier areas across the whole country, affecting almost every aspect of human well-being. These disparities present a fundamental challenge that we believe should be addressed as a matter of urgency by Christian communities throughout England.

If you are part of a church outside the Wirral and are interested in the idea of linking with a church in a wealthier or more deprived area, then contact **Tom Sefton** at Church Urban Fund ([tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk](mailto:tom.sefton@cuf.org.uk)). Subject to interest, we will be holding a number of workshops early next year to help extend this programme beyond the Wirral.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

Electronic copies of this and other research reports are available as free downloads from:  
[www.cuf.org.uk/research](http://www.cuf.org.uk/research)