

A large, circular photograph of two hands shaking, one from a darker-skinned person and one from a lighter-skinned person, set against a blurred background of lights. The image is partially overlaid by a green, textured brushstroke that runs horizontally across the middle of the page.

Engaging with your local authority and other partners

Lessons learned and recommendations

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Pete Lyndon

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Introduction

Creating and gaining opportunities to share the gospel and advance the Kingdom of God in our towns and cities are key goals of our gospel centred, kingdom minded churches in Commission.

But how?

“The biggest sources of opportunity are collaboration and partnership”

- Matt Parker

Opportunities can multiply as we work together with those with others who carry responsibility for the welfare and prosperity of our communities and cities, such as the local authority, charities, and the business leaders active among us.

Collaborating with others to engage with those living with brokenness and the effects of poverty enable us to make a much greater difference to both the lives of those in need of any kind, helps to change the impression of Christianity, and creates many more opportunities for the gospel.

An overriding principle

It's vital to remain true to your identity, mission and values.

This can and is being done as the examples in this brief paper demonstrate. The church is a unique organisation, with a unique mission. You can and should carry that identity into council chambers, board rooms, and communities with confidence. Facing the great economic and societal challenges of this generation there is more and more willingness to accept churches as essential and valued partners.

Let's make the most of every opportunity.

“How much doctrinal unity you need to partner with someone depends on what you are partnering with them for” -Tim Keller

Benefits and challenges of working with local authorities and partners

Benefits

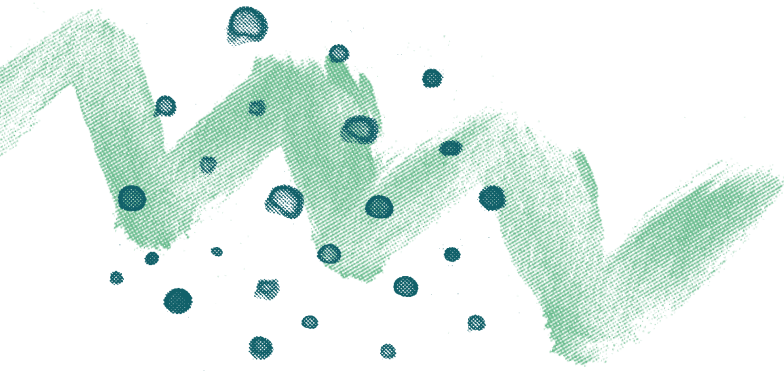
Recognised authorities and partners have many positive attributes that can help you to fulfil your mission as a church and as individual Christians.

Here are five key benefits:

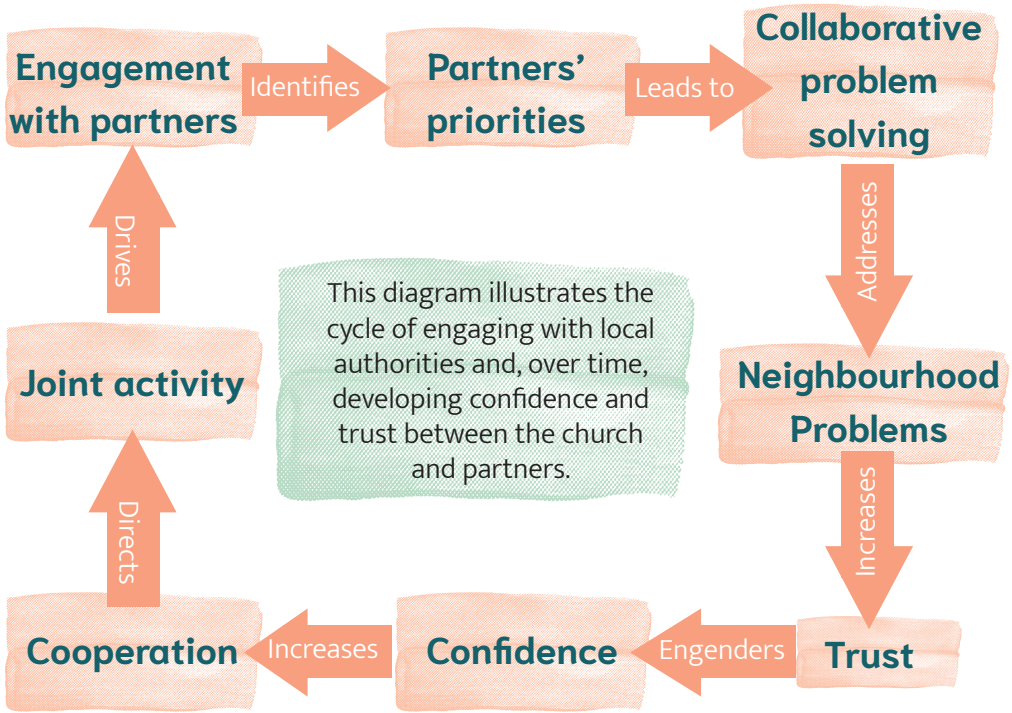
- **Helps you to punch above your weight**, especially in addressing complex issues such as housing the homeless, modern slavery etc. Today more than ever local authorities are increasingly aware of their own limited resources, and the value of working with others
- **Gives access to resources** (training, knowledge, expertise, skills, policies and experience) held by local authorities for the benefit of the people they serve. Your church can benefit from gaining access to these and get close to, help, and benefit those in great need in your community.
- **Alerts you to the needs in the community**, large or small, from other's perspectives. What are the needs that others see? Where are the gaps? How could you help? These are great questions to help you decide how you as a church can serve, and thereby gain access and credibility in your community
- **Builds trust** between the church and the other stakeholders in the community. Stephen Covey, author of "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People", wrote "Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication". Building trust with the community is a key ingredient of reaching your community in our day.
- **Creating Opportunities** to fulfil your mission, share the gospel, pray for people, make a real difference in other's lives, and gain proximity to people you would probably never otherwise meet.

Challenges

- **Local authorities are restricted by the legal limits of their powers.** They may be able to enforce minimum standards, for example on property landlords, but they cannot provide good quality housing for all – nor can they demand kindness.
- **Local authorities may not want to get involved in issues that concern you,** and they may take a very different view of some issues. Lawful personal behaviour, and the consequences of what is considered as private matters, are not their domain.
- **Local authorities have limited resources,** and there are therefore often severe limits to the support that they can provide. Today they have often had to restrict their activities to the statutory minimum because of budgetary pressures. However this is also an opportunity.
- **Statutory involvement can compromise some of the key values of the partners,** such as compassion, sensitivity, and upholding the dignity of those served. Keeping vision, faith, and selflessness fresh can then be an ongoing challenge.
- **Statutory requirements or policies may seek to inhibit faith objectives.** As a potential partner you need to be absolutely clear and resolute on your values and freedoms, for example the freedom to share our faith when invited, that are an essential element of your serving.



The confidence cycle:



Key points we have learned

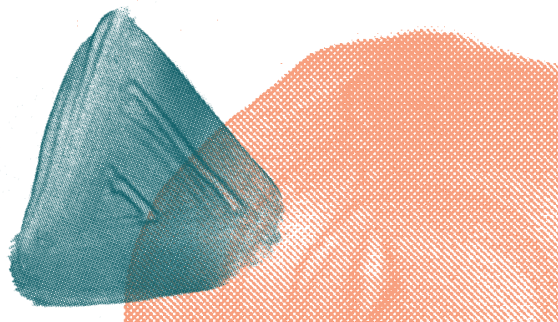


- **Building relationships take time** - Trust is not born overnight but comes over time. You can often start by performing small tasks well, maybe passing on a piece of useful information, keeping an appointment or just attending a meeting that you are invited to. Tenacity and patience are vital. Trust 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.
 - Is God in it? Have you taken time as a church to seek His leading?
 - Is there an unmet need? How is that demonstrated?
 - Are there others who are seeking to address the same issues? Can you support or partner with them? Is your proposed approach adding value?
 - Will your proposed action address the need, and bring life and empowerment, or will it simply create dependency?
 - What will you need to do what you want to do well?
 - What resources do you have, and what don't you have? Money? Volunteers? Expertise? Training? Where might you access these?
 - Could other organisations or the local council help you (bearing in mind the overriding principle above)? How? How might you approach them?
 - For major or complex initiatives it's of great value to put all of your thinking down in writing. Doing so creates clarity, ensuring that everything is well thought through, such as cost, sustainability, and resourcing, - and helps you to remain accountable. It can also demonstrate to potential partners that you are well thought through, organised, credible, and likely to be reliable partners. Such a document is sometimes referred to as a business plan
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- **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 faith a problem? Are they frightened that you will be proselytizing or discriminatory? Can you reassure them that your approach will be sensitive to the situation of vulnerable people?
- **Build a bridge that will take the weight off 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. Harness existing relationships, and previous times of cooperation. Have volunteers serving in the other partners existing works. Participate in cross-sector groups, getting to know the other participants.



- **Consider the best legal structure**, such as a Community Interest Company, or a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, to manage particular projects or the church's work in the community. This is especially relevant where the partner cannot be seen to engage with a religious body or where there is a significant liability, such as for employment or buildings, for trustees of the church as a charity. Sometimes you may be obliged to form a particular structure as this may be a condition of government authorising your activity. However, beware the dangers of separating this structure from the church, because ownership will decrease and potentially open up the work to your church's values being watered down, which has sometimes occurred in the UK and India. There can be ways of ensuring that you create a separate legal structure, but retain complete unity with the church, for example by having the same aims and objectives, but focussed on the specific need, and by having the your Trustees as Directors.
- **Look carefully 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 shared 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. Be particularly careful of the words you use to ensure they are understood as you intend them to be understood. 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 misinterpreted. 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? As concerned Christians in Weymouth 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 known that there was an increase in robbery and antisocial behaviour during this time.

In our initial planning we selected early Saturday evenings as the best opportunity to 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.

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 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.

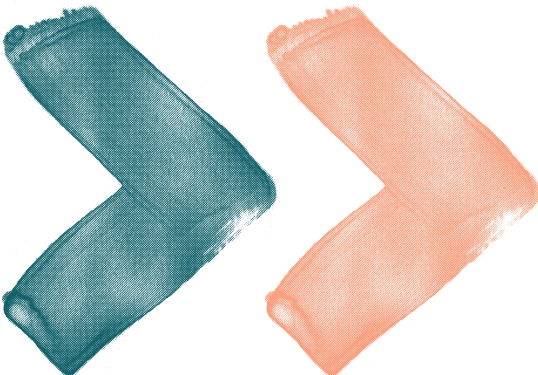


Preparation:

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 distance on standby and a 'link community safer neighbourhood officer' to help with issues on a day to day basis. We trained the team regarding operating lawfully, 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 and initiatives such as those addressing public drinking and disorder. In partnership with our local street pastor team we have demonstrated positive outcomes. These include including evidence 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 people are well fed early on and 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 were able to raise this issue in a constructive way, 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

At one point a secular Facebook group was set up to help the homeless which had no engagement with local authorities and which had 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. 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 – The Useful Wood Company

This is a story about how some Christians from local churches in Woking got together to address some of the social needs in the area.

It started with the shared vision of a handful of church members – a desire to address local social issues via a new social enterprise company.

Killing two birds with one stone

- Recycling wood that would otherwise end up in builder's skips is one of those small deeds that demonstrates a practical way of husbanding the natural resources we have been given.
- Offering practical routes into training and preparation for skilled and satisfying employment, whilst creating enough income for the scheme to be self-sufficient, is a clear win for the individual and the community.

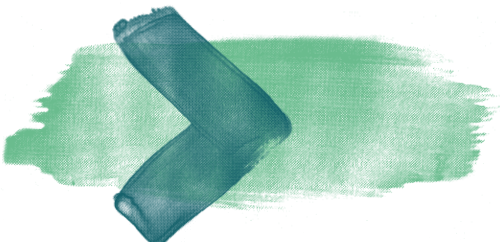
But how could this become a reality in the absence of finance, volunteers, and equipped workshop facilities in suitable premises (a very expensive resource in the Home Counties)?

There's the possible...

The team got down to the demanding but unglamorous business of registering the initiative as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Welcome Church made an initial gift, and fundraising started. As the news spread by word of mouth several small gifts were received.

Applications to grant making bodies were completed and submitted. Open evening were held to create local interest and recruit all sorts of volunteers, from those who could collect wood from willing contractors, to trained and experienced craftsmen with the patience to teach others. Lots of interest was expressed, and some volunteers recruited. More needed though!



But the impossible?

Where on earth would they find a premises in the centre of the town that they could afford?

If they found one, how would they get hold of all the specialist equipment that they would need?

With God nothing is impossible!

A local business was so impressed with this social enterprise start-up that they offered the perfect premises for the project in the heart of Woking, under a one year lease. The premises were larger and more appropriate to the needs of the workshop than could ever have been anticipated. The building provided everything they needed to start up the enterprise that had been planned! Not only that, but the premises is opposite a project providing accommodation for homeless people, with opportunities for partnering with another organisation for the good of the city and local communities. The local council have expressed their support and interest.

And ... The Community Foundation for Surrey have made a really useful grant towards their costs!





Written by Pete Lyndon

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