

“People are suspicious of faith groups in communities. If you become too open about your faith you risk losing people. But getting people out of their homes and working for the good of the area is important. We are trying to do this together.”

Mark Pulford, One Palfrey Big Local

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme of local transformation, described as ‘perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK’.

In this compelling tour of five Big Local areas, Stephen Bates interviews a range of people about how faith motivates and sustains their involvement in community. From Middlesbrough to Walsall he reveals the common ground shared by people from different religious traditions, as well as the deep commitment they bring to the dual roles of active citizen and believer.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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Community Spirits

The changing role of faith in place

Stephen Bates

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About the author

Stephen Bates was the Guardian's religious affairs correspondent for seven years between 2000-2007 and was named religious writer of the year by the Andrew Cross Awards in 2005 and 2006. He has also written about religion for the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph, the Tablet and the Church Times. His books include: *A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (Hodder 2004) and *God's Own Country: American Politics and Religion* (Hodder 2007).

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FOREWORD FROM LOCAL TRUST

BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major Lottery funder. Between 2010-12 the Big Lottery Fund identified 150 areas that had historically ‘missed out’ on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided local residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in that decision-making process.

Beyond that, rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local have been for local people to decide. By design, the programme is bottom-up and community led; there are no top-down targets or centrally-imposed delivery models. The timeframe for Big Local extends over 15 years, allowing communities to take their time, build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change without the usual pressures to meet end-of-year spend targets or other arbitrary bureaucratic deadlines.

The activities and initiatives Big Local areas have chosen to take forward reflect the diversity of the communities themselves, included everything from building affordable homes to tackling antisocial behaviour, creating or preserving community facilities, parks and sports centres; launching new training and employment schemes; tackling local health and environmental issues; addressing community cohesion; and providing more activities for young people. Most importantly,

through their initiatives, residents of Big Local areas have collectively developed skills, partnerships and confidence that will help them lead their communities into the future.

Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to reflect on the experience of Big Local areas, and the lessons they may provide for wider debates taking place about shared prosperity, community and place.

David Boyle’s essay *The Grammar of Change*, the first in the series, highlighted the transformatory potential that can be released by transferring power, resources and responsibility to local people. In *New Seeds Beneath the Snow*, Julian Dobson placed Big Local in the context of past area-based regeneration programmes.

What has been notable in many Big Local areas has been the active involvement of faith communities, as participants in community decision-making, delivery partners, a source of committed volunteers and, often, as providers of places for local people to organise and come together – a vital resource that, as Dan Gregory highlights in *Skittled Out*, the third in our essay series, is increasingly under threat.

In this essay, Steven Bates, explores how faith, poverty and social change interact and overlap; the dual challenges of declining congregations and increasing need; and what all of this might mean for communities where church, mosque or gurdwarah are amongst the last institutions left standing as local people work together to tackle shared problems and create better places to live.

Matt Leach
Chief executive
Local Trust



INTRODUCTION

“Faith as a motivator for voluntary action is actually very difficult to prove, assess or measure.”

RELIGIOUS BELIEF, CERTAINLY IN CHRISTIAN denominations, is in long-term decline in Britain. There was a time not so very long ago when churches across the country provided not just spiritual and religious comfort but were just about the sole sources for a wide range of social services for their communities—indeed, they were the only institutional source of care and education for centuries. However, in the last seventy years or so, since the advent of government intervention and the welfare state, that position has changed as secular, statutory, services have largely eroded voluntary provision by communities.

The Church of England and the Roman Catholic and Jewish faiths still notionally run many schools, but their funding, management and curriculums are now largely in secular hands. Other welfare provisions, such as hospitals

and social work, have also been taken over on a more organised basis by public institutions. This change has occurred alongside and may be related to a decline in religious observance. The British Social Attitudes survey in 2010 showed 43% claiming to have no religion, compared with 31% in 1983, with less than 10% of the population now attending weekly Christian services: figures that appear to be heading inexorably downward. More recent statistics seem to indicate that more than half the population no longer claims a religious belief, though they may have supplemented or replaced it with varied notions of spirituality.

At the same time, many religious groups still actively engaged in social work have become more professionalised in their approach, with the provision of services less explicitly sectarian or tied to their beliefs: The Salvation Army is an example of this. The fact that faith-based charities often use biblical or denominational names as references may not be apparent to those seeking their help. The Trussell Trust, CUF's Together Network and The Cinnamon Network are among the modern faith-driven organisations delivering frontline services in response to their clients' needs, whatever their religious allegiance or observance. Of course, all faith groups have their own charities providing aid to communities in this country and internationally, as part of a common human as well as religious purpose, but this essay concentrates on those faith communities working within a few areas, as a window into what may be happening on a wider scale in communities across the country.

I visited five neighbourhoods that have received funding from the Big Local programme and have significant faith-group involvement. Administered by the national charity, Local Trust, Big Local targets £1million of National Lottery money to each

of 150 local neighbourhoods over ten years, giving residents the opportunity to make their own specific decisions and choose their own priorities in how they serve and improve their areas.

Insofar as faiths, both Christian and non-Christian, have also become more evangelical in pursuit of congregations, their position on certain issues—abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage—has made them appear out of step, reactionary and unsympathetic to the views of the wider population. As Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, once declared (admittedly before he became archbishop): “We have a special relationship with the cultural life of our country and we must not fall out of step with this if we are not to become absurd and incredible.” The same goes for other Christian denominations—and maybe eventually for other faith groups too. There are signs that voluntary work has become more focused on essentially secular projects, such as environmentalism, by some of those who in a previous era might have directed their energies towards their churches.

Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University, the leading British sociologist of religion, says in an essay published in February 2018: “Declaring yourself a Christian—even Church of England—is no longer the normal, unproblematic marker of cultural identity, ethnic- majority belonging, normality and even good morals that it once was... the churches have become more marginal to everyday life, ritual practice and culture whilst ‘spirituality’ and ‘no religion’ have become more central.”

In 2007, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, in a report entitled Faith and Voluntary Action, claimed: “Religious affiliation makes little difference in terms of volunteering...faith as a motivator for voluntary action is actually very difficult to prove, assess or measure.” It is, in

any event, hard to decipher what counts as voluntary action: is it within the family, looking after a sick parent (or child), helping at a food bank or the citizens' advice bureau, or doing the church flowers? As religious congregations age, what volunteering avenues are open to them?

The truth is that faith groups have become engaged in Big Local projects across the country, not as means of proselytisation but as a form of practical social help of the sort they once practised routinely. Their personal faiths inform their desire to assist their communities: at the most basic level, fulfilling the biblical and Qu'ranic imperatives to love their neighbours and help those in trouble. They do not – as is sometimes speculated – see this as a mechanical means of converting souls nor soft marketing: indeed, the Church of England, which is at the heart of many of these projects because of its parish structure, seems almost apologetic about its involvement, disavowing any intention of requiring or expecting church attendance.

Although Local Trust does not have data on how many projects have involvement by religious organisations, it is clear that the Big Local idea has been taken up by faith groups in areas right across the country. However, some faith groups are suspicious of, even downright hostile to Big Local because of the source of its funding: the proceeds of gambling, as they see it. It is fair to say that none of those groups I visited were completely comfortable about the source of the money, though they rationalised it as providing resources for the common good: paying back at least some of the cash that the lottery and other forms of gambling have sucked out of their communities. Some Muslims would not accept the money directly at all and a Methodist chapel apparently declined to get involved in one of the areas visited. There are likely to be others across faith

groups.

In the sort of deprived communities where Big Local is targeted, quite often church buildings are the only communal amenities available. Paul Bickley, director of political programmes at the religious think tank, Theos, said: “It is difficult to start from zero where there is no social infrastructure and few institutions or networks. Churches survive and retain their identity. They are more resilient at a time when other organisations might have folded.” Religious ministers also tend to have a distinctiveness and status within their areas, as part of the community but not of the authorities—they may also be among the only figures with the experience to advise and lead. Bickley said: “There’s recognition with a dog collar.” That may be harder for some newer, less established religious groups; the Church of England certainly still has presence.

Of the five projects I visited, from Middlesbrough to Walsall, three made use of church properties, one was based in former church school premises and the last made use of a church hall for non-Christian gatherings. If such monuments to a religious, communal past—and reduced present—did not exist, it would simply not be possible to hold meetings or organise classes and advice sessions locally.

When I first became a religious affairs correspondent for the Guardian in 2000, I assumed that all religious groups were pretty ecumenical these days, getting on as decent chaps together. I soon learned differently: sometimes there was factionalism, outright hostility and disdain (even within denominations) and on other occasions a wary respect and limited collaboration, as the palsied progress towards the supposed goal of ecumenism has demonstrated over many years.

In Big Local areas I found a degree of co-operation between faith groups, but not complete agreement. Church of England clergy were more willing participants because of the established church's long commitment to the parish structure and to the welfare of all local inhabitants. Other faiths, such as the Catholics, tend to have a different vision, seeing their responsibility as first to their own parishioners. In the projects I visited they tend to do their own thing, through providing services such as food banks which are complementary to those of the Anglicans.

What does the experience of Big Local tell us about the role of faith in deprived communities today—and to what extent does that cast light on wider changes in religion and society?





CHAPTER ONE

One Palfrey, Walsall

“It is my Muslim duty to give back to my community: that is what my faith tells me.”

“PALFREY IS PERFECT,” says Imrana Niazi, the chair and secretary of Palfrey Big Local, with a smile. “It’s a nice feeling to say that.”

It isn’t of course, no more than anywhere else. It has problems with anti-social behaviour, drugs, prostitution, some violence, child exploitation and litter. But Imrana and her colleagues are working hard to counter that through their IMatter Walsall project, intended to be one of the legacies of Big Local. The project is supported by the West Midlands Police neighbourhood policing team and emphasises education to bring about behavioural change; and, after a rocky start in 2013, they are convinced they are making headway.

Palfrey is a working-class suburb about a mile south of the centre of Walsall in the West Midlands. The area is a mix of rundown Victorian terraced streets—first built up at the height

of the Industrial Revolution in the 1840s—former council housing, 1960s low-level blocks of flats and newish builds. It is well defined because it is bordered by busy roads to the north and east, a retail park to the south and an industrial estate and railway line to the west.

That description belies the rather charming name—a palfrey is the old name for a docile horse of the sort once ridden by women and old men: Chaucer's Wife of Bath in the Canterbury Tales sat 'easily on an ambling horse', while the monk in the same tales had a palfrey 'as brown as is a berry'. As if to emphasise the connection, a lifesize, modern stainless-steel statue of a horse stands proudly in the local park, a tribute to Walsall's traditional trade of leather working and saddlery. But it is a long time since a horse ambled through Palfrey.

Whatever it used to be, the area is largely Muslim now: Big Local's website reckons about two thirds of the population are of Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Indian heritage and only 20% white Europeans: English, now with central and Eastern European incomers. Altogether, there are about fifteen different ethnic groups in a population of just over 7,000 people. The communities come together at fun days and other events in the area.

Along the main Milton Street there are fast-food takeaways and small supermarkets, and a long line of small shops, dress shops selling saris and salwar kameezes, Halal butchers, Polish and Romanian general stores. Surveys show that not only is the population young—44% under the age of 25 and a further 30% under 45—but that it is also relatively stable: nearly half own their own homes or are buying them, with a further quarter renting from social landlords.

Arfan Zaman, the coordinator, is one of eight siblings. He

was born and grew up here and all his brothers and sisters live within a mile's radius. He has worked and volunteered locally for more than 16 years. Imrana has lived in Palfrey all her life too—it is one reason for their pride in and passion for their area. The community has seen off redevelopment before, in the 1970s when the council wanted to demolish the local terraces, and more recently when it had plans to pull down the former Victorian school that now serves as a community centre, its high-windowed classrooms echoing with dance classes, a youth club and a toddler group. Photographs on the walls show volunteering groups such as Mahila Jagruti, dedicated to liaising with local Asian women and advising them on educational and welfare opportunities. There are other amenities too: an infant and a junior school and a girls' school, with other schools nearby. Palfrey Park, where the horse statue stands, is a 16-acre green space with tennis courts, a bowling green, a soccer pitch and a bandstand. There is also a further playing field at Broadway West and two other smaller parks which Big Local has encouraged local residents to improve as community amenities.

And there are also four churches, two mosques, a Sikh temple and an Orthodox church converted from a former Church of England building. That too required a residents' campaign to preserve it from council plans to pull the building down and convert the vicarage into a rehabilitation centre for ex-offenders. Residents did not believe that, with its other social problems and especially with the park nearby, that was what the area required.

One Palfrey Big Local had a troubled start in initially establishing a stable partnership of residents to oversee the Big Local funding in 2013. That proved challenging, and developing a shared plan was difficult, reflecting the need to balance the

ambitions and needs of the community against the available resources. They ran through three Big Local representatives and a director. Although £1million sounds a lot, stretched over ten years and a whole neighbourhood there are limits to what can be achieved, and that also depends on the capacity of local volunteers.

It now seems to be more stable and perhaps less ambitious—or more realistic—in its goals, concentrating on four key tasks: making sure the neighbourhood is cleaner and safer, improving the health and wellbeing of residents, giving them better access to jobs and education advice and enhancing community activities and services.

When local people were asked for their opinions, one told them: “The people of Palfrey are lovely. There is a real sense of community. It’s diverse and inclusive with everyone kind and approachable.” The problems, though, were identified as litter and fly tipping, parking, antisocial behaviour and crime, drugs and a need for better facilities and activities.

How does religion fit into such secular problems? “It is my Muslim duty to give back to my community: that is what my faith tells me,” said Imrana. From a different faith comes the same perspective: Colleen Jones, the One Palfrey Big Local secretary, comes, she says, from the happy-clappy end of strict Evangelicalism. She said: “I have always volunteered and always been involved in the church and in the community: that is just part of me as a Christian woman.”

She will be standing in the local elections as a Conservative candidate, though not in Palfrey. Another member of the committee, Mark Pulford, who has lived in the ward for 30 years, is agnostic and a former local Labour councillor. He said: “We are trying to do this together. People are suspicious of faith groups in communities. They are not

automatically happy about church involvement and not all church people would go to each others’ churches. But we can work together for the community. We have separate identities and if you become too open about your faith you risk losing people. But getting people out of their homes and working for the good of the area is important.”

Arfan Zaman’s social-work career began with training in youth work in his local mosque and proceeded with a national leadership programme for young Muslims, which opened his eyes to the possibility of working with other religious groups for the whole community. Big Local fits that perspective. He said: “It’s giving back to the community, whether you are doing it for the sake of God or working in a paid capacity. I am an ambassador for my faith when I do this work.”

In Palfrey there has been a series of community meetings for residents to raise concerns and discuss solutions to problems, many of which are addressed by getting people to take responsibility for their patch, but also by lobbying the local authority to take action to tackle wider problems. Locals used to be scared to walk through Palfrey Park, especially at night: bushes and hedges were unkempt, youngsters and addicts hung about, and there were sometimes justified fears about muggings or assaults. Now the shrubbery has been trimmed and tidied up by the council, and vandalism and anti-social behaviour stamped on. The park looks cared for and has become a more pleasant place to visit. Links are being established through Colleen Jones between the Friends of the Park and Big Local. As we walked through it after our meeting, Arfan bent down unobtrusively to pick up the glass shards of a broken bottle and deposited them in a bin. The litter problem in the area has not been solved but it has diminished.

It comes down to educating people—creating behavioural

change in individuals for the benefit of all. The small boy admonished for dropping a crisp packet who replied cheekily that he was creating employment—a notion he must have got from his parents—was gently admonished to take his own responsibility for improving the environment. “We are starting with children and building up to young people. If they see that we are picking litter up, not leaving it to the council, that has a massive impact.”

On a larger, even more unsightly scale, fly tipping results from the fact that many local properties are rented out by private landlords who can’t be bothered to clear away rubbish left by former tenants. They commonly take deposits of several hundred pounds from their new tenants without clearing up the mess left behind by the old. The council charges only £15 to take away three items for disposal so it might be thought an easy deal for the landlords to arrange pick-ups of old fridges and mattresses, but apparently not. The Big Local folk suspect the landlords don’t want their financial affairs to be looked into too closely— or their profits diminished, even by a few pounds.

Taking National Lottery money to fund the programme was a problem for the Muslim supporters of the project, but it was resolved pragmatically. Arfan said: “It’s about the wider benefit, using the same money to support people in debt. Maybe their money problems are caused by gambling so we are using the money we get from the proceeds of gambling to advise them.”

Other goals of the programme are to give local residents a greater sense of their community and its wellbeing, and better access to jobs and life-long learning. There are other local groups to collaborate with: Sure Start, helping parents with children under five, and Neighbourhood Watch. Community

spirit does not seem to be lacking: residents say they like living in a multicultural area and there has not locally been a problem with racial or radical Islamic extremism, unlike in some other parts of Walsall. The group is encouraging close contact with the police, particularly over the issue of child sexual exploitation, tackling grooming and online abuse.

One Palfrey Big Local is proceeding cautiously for now: it has not splashed out or made big spending commitments, instead concentrating more on changing attitudes and building initiatives that will last beyond the ten-year time scale of the lottery funding. “We have to be resident led,” said Arfan. “It’s amazing—resident power.”



CHAPTER TWO

Grace Mary to Lion Farm, Sandwell, West Midlands

“Church leaders are trusted not to have a political agenda. There is no fear we will be seen as proselytising.”

THE GRACE MARY TO LION FARM BIG LOCAL is just a few miles south of Palfrey but in a very different area: 80% of residents are white, with a blend of cultures including East European and African immigrants and some asylum seekers from the Middle East. The project’s name gives some indication that it covers a more amorphous area than Palfrey does. It is made up of five distinct communities in the heart of the Black Country, huddling round the steep slopes of Portway Hill, the highest point in the West Midlands—the locals like to claim that the wind whips up to their doorsteps and pavements straight from the Urals. Perhaps the other most visible local landmark is the large AA call centre looming over the nearby M5 motorway: that and a Centrica call centre are significant local employers. There are smart, owner-occupied estates of executive houses on the fringes, but at the heart are pre-Second World War housing

estates clinging precariously up the side of the hill, and areas of acute poverty.

Three churches of different theologies are collaborating to make the Big Local work here. The high-church Anglican Holy Cross church is in a very low-church-looking, 1970s building in the middle of the Grace Mary estate near the top of the hill. Oakham is a long-established independent, non-denominational evangelical church in another part of the area, where it was first established in the 1870s. And St James's is a traditional evangelical Anglican parish church down the hill in the centre of the Lion Farm estate of post-war housing, overlooked by three tower blocks. It is in a purpose-built 1960s modernist concrete building, dating from much the same time as the estate and now, like the houses around about, beginning to show its age. But it is an impressive building with good facilities. These include a large hall attached to the church which is used for a youth club and dance group, mother and toddler meetings, dances, karate and Zumba sessions and even indoor bowls on a Monday afternoon. It is, geographically at least, in the heart of the community, opposite the church's primary school and across the road from a small avenue of shops and with the local GP surgery around the corner.

Next door to the church is a large vicarage which tells its own story: the last vicar here moved on ten years ago and is not likely to be replaced any time soon. The parish is overseen by a neighbouring priest and the church has instead a minister-in-charge, Jill MacDonald, for pastoral and organisational purposes, but she is not an incumbent—Birmingham diocese is looking for new organisational structures as budgets are stretched. The vicarage has become the Lion Farm Action Centre and employs the Big Local community worker, who has now moved in and set up an office, a computer suite, a daily jobs

club and an after-school homework club in one of the rooms. In the summer they plan to tackle the large abandoned garden at the back and convert that to community use too.

There are other local facilities, including a new lifestyle sports centre on the edge of the area, with hydro pool, running track and climbing wall, but realistically the organisation of Big Local had to come from the three churches—and they had to co-operate to get things done. Chris Sale, the church-appointed youth and community worker who chairs the partnership and is based at St James's, said: "There could only be one lead body, so the churches had to get together. We had some links before, but it was much more hit and miss. This has made us raise our horizons. None of the churches could have done it on their own."

His colleague, the Rev. Pete Hayward, who is in charge of Oakham, said: "Actually, on important doctrines we are very close—that's one thing we have learned."

Surprisingly, not all churches become involved. Sometimes the fact that Big Local is lottery funded is a deterrent. The other churches have, however, rationalised the proceeds of gambling. Chris Sale said he believed great good could come from the money if it enhanced people's lives. Peter Hayward added: "It's estimated that four times as much is spent on tickets than comes back to the community: that's £4 million going out of the area in lottery tickets and scratch cards. We can't deprive the community."

The Rev. Chris Allen, the Big Local area representative who advises the project, chipped in: "It's a case of, can we have some of our money back?"

Some of the Big Local money has gone on an outdoor gym next to the GP surgery. There has also been some refurbishment of the churches. But there has also been a jobs fair, advice on

getting employment, fun days to enhance community spirit, and litter pick-up days around the estates, with all those helping being given the incentive of a day trip to Blackpool last October. In the end, the litter gatherers managed to fill five skips, and the organisers took three coachloads for their day of fresh air and fun.

Such collaborative efforts have produced other, more individual initiatives too, such as clearing a house of rubbish for a disabled man: a service Sandwell Council could not provide. Other attempts to improve the area have included a gardens-in-bloom competition with a cash prize of £150 for the best, and Argos vouchers for the winner of a poster-design competition for children to publicise the gardens competition.

Chris Sale said: “We want people to take a pride in the area. We need to say this is a great place to live. We need to say, enjoy where you live, be proud of it. It is about changing how people see the area as much as changing the area itself.

“We consulted on what people want and it’s better facilities for young people, a better environment, things for families to do together, health and wellbeing, jobs—essentially what all communities want: not to be overlooked or left behind.”

The two Chrises and Pete agree that being from local churches, rather than being officials from the local authority, brings advantages to Big Local. Chris Allen said: “Church leaders are trusted not to have a political agenda. There is no fear they will be seen as proselytising.”

Chris Sale said: “The thing is, we try not to let people down. We turn up, we run events and we deliver on what we have promised. And whatever we do, we do it well. It is important that it is of the highest quality.”

How does their religious faith play into the Big Local project? Chris Sale said: “Big Local’s priorities are the same

as Jesus taught. He spent his time with people spurned and overlooked by society and was critical of people in power. It’s in the Beatitudes isn’t it? Helping those who need it—it’s a way of showing God’s love and care.

“It goes back to living life in its fullness and peace. That’s what my faith means to me. You help people in both good and difficult times— that’s what I build my life on. I believe I have been called to be here. I came here as a youth worker to the community 18 years ago, so I am technically an outsider, but the church has been here from the start. I have always gone into the primary school to take assemblies using Bible stories and now some of those kids are grown-ups: when they see me, they ask if I am still doing the stories—they can remember them. We are sowing seeds—it is God who changes people’s hearts. If they don’t come to church, that’s OK too. So long as they feel valued and know God loves, cares and cherishes them.”

Pete Hayward said: “There is a biblical warrant for showing meaning to the community. One of the best things is seeing people’s potential and bringing it out, seeing the change in them. There’s a lot of low motivation here, poor education and poor health. We are trying to give a sense of belonging and value.”

There is crime and anti-social behaviour on the estates. Reported crime is quite low; they say, people don’t trust the police and community officers are stretched. Low crime? Well, just three shootings and a kidnapping—but they were people from out of the area, apparently. And, being in a direct line between Birmingham and Wolverhampton, it’s a bit of a drug run—you can smell the cannabis wafting in the wind across Lion Farm in the summer, they say. To counteract that they have brought in a theatre group specialising in youth-issues drama and workshops, with follow-up lessons in the primary school.

Some of the Big Local grant has gone towards renovating the churches, not because they are religious but because they are social hubs for the Big Local project. Chris Allen said: “There’s no view to bring people in on Sundays but research indicates that church growth occurs in the longer term.” Oakham has grown because of its social activism over many years. Pete Hayward, the minister, says on a Sunday they get 120 people regularly to worship services. His church is currently helping two asylum seekers from Iran who have come to live locally. St. James’s has seen a slow rise in the congregation from the low twenties to the mid-forties: not huge, given the size of the estate that surrounds it, but a significant sign of growth. Chris Sale said: “It is not so much about people coming to our church, it’s about them having a relationship with Christ. I don’t care where people go to church, so long as they go somewhere to learn about Jesus and his teachings.”





CHAPTER THREE

Collyhurst, north Manchester

“I’d shut the lottery down tomorrow and make gambling illegal. But I’ll take the money to help this community.”

“FRANKLY, MANY OF THE PEOPLE HERE are at the mercy of a system that doesn’t give a shit about them,” said the Rev. Chris Fallone, vicar of the Anglican Church of the Saviour, Collyhurst, a mile and a half north of Manchester city centre. “They live close to the centre of one of the most exciting cities in Europe. I can walk it in 20 minutes but some never get to see it and most cannot afford to shop or socialise there.”

The industrial revolution was not kind to the development of Collyhurst and through its history the area has been demonised. By the 1960s the area was experiencing some of the worst deprivation in the country. Many of its houses were among the worst in the city, with water pouring through ceilings and walls having fallen down and not replaced. As recently as 2010, many residents were still asking for front doors and windows that did not let the wind come whipping

through. Today it has a population of 7,000 people who live in a conglomeration of post-war housing estates and tower blocks that have been brought up to standard. On my way to Chris's fortress-like 1970s vicarage next to his church, I passed the cushions of an abandoned settee on the pavement and a gap where the estate's last maisonettes have been demolished.

Regeneration has been promised but just 110 social housing units will replace 300 that have gone and those new houses will be sold or rented on the private market. The community is going to be dispersed to improve the area and change its traditional reputation. For now, however, the estate is blighted with poor health, poverty and high unemployment, some of it passed down from one generation to the next. People say you can tell someone from Collyhurst by the condition of their teeth. Life expectancy is ten years lower than in more affluent areas of the city.

Chris said: "We are one stop on the bus route up from the city, but no one ever gets off here. There is no post office, one pub, one shop—and that's mostly selling alcohol—and if you want a pint of milk or to buy some food, that's expensive. Oh, and there's a pawn shop. Even the chip shops have closed. They talk about sticky money—if you spend £10 in a shop it gets recycled and spent again and then again: three times the money into a community. Well, that doesn't happen here." He runs through the problems: domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse and child neglect. "Without doubt there's some right scallywags around here. I often wonder if the chaplain at Manchester Prison probably sees more of my parishioners than I do."

And then there's debt. When Collyhurst Big Local helped to fund a debt advice service in 2016 in Chris's church in the heart of the estate, they reckoned they were managing £1.3m

of mainly local debt in the first year—and that was only what they were told about. Last year the staff and volunteers at the advice centre held 576 appointments. These are personal meetings—not distanced, online, remote from people who anyway don't own computers and usually don't understand how to use them. The advisers are face to face with anxious, often angry, frustrated and confused local residents worn down by the labyrinthine, seemingly uncaring bureaucracy of organisations such as the Department of Work and Pensions.

Last year they helped a client facing starvation during a long-running dispute with the DWP, which insisted the department needed to be paid back a five-figure sum. This had been going on for several years, despite a much earlier court judgement in the client's favour—the true figure was a vastly smaller amount which had long since been paid off. The DWP staff dealing with the case claimed not to have received the court decision which had been filed elsewhere in the system. It took almost a full year to sort out, but eventually the debt advisers finally won the day with the DWP staff accepting their misjudgement, paying back the full amount they had reclaimed wrongly by capping the client's benefits for years, and offering belated compensation for the years of misery and hardship they had caused.

Worse still, there are the loan sharks circling the estate, knocking on doors in the run-up to Christmas waving wads of notes. "You can see them coming round offering easy cash", said Chris. "Technically, if it's an illegal loan you don't have to pay it back, but then you'll get threats, broken windows, a broken arm, your pet disembowelled on the doorstep. We've had all that. We are overwhelmed by the level of need."

By late last year the outstanding debt level being managed was down to £700,000. The volunteers don't offer

cash, but they do help with advice on debt solutions from insolvency to debt management. They also offer help on how to budget so as not to fall into debt again. Most days of the week advisers huddle behind partitions around the walls of the church, speaking confidentially to anyone who comes in asking about applying for benefits. Now there is universal credit which requires online form filling, so the church has set up a computer centre to help claimants. The bureaucracy has improved, they say, since Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* exposed brusque and uncaring officialdom. But there are still cases such as the parent who was summoned for interview on the morning they had an appointment to take a sick son to the GP surgery. They explained the problem and was told that was fine, an appointment would be rearranged—and a week later they were sanctioned for missing the interview: thirteen weeks with no benefits, no money and a sick child. Heartless idiocies still exist.

Wendy Steele, who runs the debt advice centre, used to work in banking for twenty years and is a churchgoer. "I didn't feel compelled to do this because I have a Christian faith," she said. "Lots of people go to church who don't do anything for their local area, but faith is a philosophical approach to life. If you have the ability and the skill set I think you have a moral obligation to do something useful for the community."

Typical of those the volunteers have helped is Joan. Her husband died six years ago leaving a mountain of debts and she had not had a good night's sleep ever since, worrying how she was going to pay them off while living on £63.50 a week. She wouldn't go to a food bank out of pride and, because, she reasoned to herself, families with children needed help more than she did. Eventually, she heard of the advice centre and came along. The volunteers resolved her problems in an

afternoon, liberating her and pointing her in the direction of an initiative called the food pantry, where for £2 you can get £13 worth of food. Tune in on YouTube to *Debt Advice at the Saviour Collyhurst* and you can see Joan telling her story and weeping in gratitude. She has done more than that, she now volunteers at the pantry. And she sleeps soundly.

Getting the Collyhurst Big Local off the ground was not easy. There was a lot of negativity and apathy in the community, too used to being promised so much, so often and being let down so many times. There was a shortage of people willing to take on leadership roles, or with the experience or the skills necessary to assume positions of responsibility. It had to be Chris Fallone. "I didn't want to chair it. I thought I wouldn't have the time—and man, did I underestimate that!" Did taking National Lottery money worry him? "Not one iota. I'd shut the lottery down tomorrow and make gambling illegal. But I'll take the money to help this community. Faith, one hundred per cent, informs what I do with Big Local."

Faith organisations play a big part in encouraging a community cohesion that aspires to be more than just self-interest groups, and the local churches are almost the only communal amenities. Christianity is the largest faith group in Collyhurst: there are a Catholic primary and a Church of England primary, two Roman Catholic churches, St Patrick's and St. Malachy's—a legacy of the original Irish immigration in the 19th Century— and Chris's CofE Church of the Saviour, built in the 1970s to amalgamate three earlier parishes. The faith groups' social outreach pre-dated Big Local, informal collaboration that was complementary, not competitive. Initially, Chris Fallone agreed to co-chair the Big Local partnership with Sister Rita, a Catholic nun, but when she retired he was left to chair the project alone. Collaboration

remains, with the Catholics running food banks while Chris's church has the debt advice centre. To get that up and keep it running, Chris has had to scrape money together: it costs £133,000 a year to meet demand. £30,000 has come from Big Local over three years, matching funding from Manchester diocese, £20,000 over two years from the church community fund and the same from a local trust. Entering the project's third year, they still need to raise another £60,000: it is hand-to-mouth survival.

Big Local in Collyhurst is not just about debt advice. They are trying to tidy up the area and establish a network of walks beside the River Irk which borders the estate. There are allotments and orchards for residents' use and there is a small garden plot by the church to teach people how to grow vegetables and fruit. There are cookery classes—"an escape from the frozen sausage culture"—and the church hall buzzes with mothers and toddlers. There's tea and coffee and free soup at lunchtime, served by 82-year-old Shirley Hannon and her friend, church warden Vi Lowe.

Shirley, who has lived on the estate since 1970, said: "It's hard to tell people God loves them when they don't love themselves. God transforms you slowly, you have to work at it. We can't look at people as a lost cause because you don't know how God will work on them. It may all come out twenty years later."

The women cluck over the poverty around them and the whiff of drugs wafting over the estate in summer. And they hate to hear mothers swearing at their children. "The children are so polite in school: they are taught to say thank you, and then they come out of the school gates and their mothers say: "Come here you little shit." Vi sighs: "It's hard being a Christian in places like this."

Chris said: "I sense the Church of England is retreating from inner-city ministry, but if we were not here there is so much the community would lose: social care, food banks, advice centres—we do that. People say that the £1million is like a lottery win and it seems like that to people who don't see £6,000 a year, but it is not enough. We have our rogues round here, but nothing on the scale of bankers and people who get away with it, playing the system.

"I was not looking to leave my nice suburban parish to come here ten years ago, but now I wouldn't go back. I love the people here, they're wonderful, especially the older ones. Sitting out in our garden with a glass of wine in summer, it's beautiful—just like being in Cheshire.

"I have come to realise that the Church has something to say in places like this. God's kingdom is not pie in the sky when you die, but it can be here, now, wrongs put right, justice served and peace brokered. I try hard to share the Good News of Jesus and encourage people to commit, but I also want to see things 'on earth as in heaven'. One day all things will be rectified. I won't be deeply shocked if I don't grow the Church here by the time I retire, but I will be disappointed."



CHAPTER FOUR

North Ormesby, Middlesbrough

“You have to convince people that they can make a difference.”

NORTH ORMESBY STARTED LIFE IN THE mid-19th century as a model village on the mudflats to the east of Middlesbrough for the labourers of the Pennymans’ ironworks on the banks of the Tees. Its grid of streets of two-up, two-down terraced houses remains, as do other parts of the family’s legacy: a large market square over which looms the enormous tower of Holy Trinity Church, also founded by the Victorians.

The original church was burned down in an arson attack forty years ago, but there is a new church building alongside that holds services but also hosts community activities, including a food bank, community café, tea dances, a singing group for people with dementia and a youth group where teenagers can meet, learn skills for adult life and socialise with each other. Small shops also remain, as does a high-

windowed Victorian school now used as a community centre, with a library, boxing gym and converted rooms for health and wellbeing and other evening classes, a debt advice centre, a dance studio, IT room and facilities for those with learning disabilities.

If the estate still has a little of the feel of an urban village, it has clearly seen better days: many of the houses are battered and shabby, there are broken windows and dilapidated front doors, and high metal gates lock off the crime runs of the back passages between the streets. It is a bleak place and the houses are among the cheapest in England: not so long ago you could get one for £5,000 (they are now going for more than £20,000) and absentee private landlords started buying them up and allowing transient young tenants to move into the damp, leaking and rotting buildings, some laced with asbestos. Some have no ceilings, in others the gas supply bypasses the meters.

Once 20,000 people lived locally, but that is now down to about 3,000. The old, settled population of skilled steel workers has largely gone—there are few apprenticeships or much training for jobs either these days, since the deindustrialisation of the 1980s from which the area has never recovered. They are memorialised only in the steel benches in the local park which are embossed with the trades they used to have in these parts, such as fitters and welders.

There are asylum seekers here from many countries, not least Nigeria and Iran—this was one of the places where G4S painted the front doors red and so identified the occupants as impoverished and foreign, making them targets for abuse by racists and vandals until publicity caused the company to think again. The red doors have gone—they're mainly green now.

There are also criminals and there are drug addicts. “You can see them queueing outside the chemist’s shop from 8am”,

said Alan Mackay, the chief officer of the development trust which, along with Big Local and the local authority, is trying to improve the housing stock, the owners and their tenantry. The council has been persuaded to introduce a landlord licensing scheme to ensure properties are fit for purpose and tenants are vetted. It was the Big Local team who commissioned the development trust to set up a separate trust and provided £150,000 to buy six houses. They are being let to suitable tenants through a housing association, but the £5,000 allocated to bring each one up to standard has been far exceeded: the true cost has been nearer £30,000. Preference will be given to local people, there will be credit-worthiness checks, and rent defaulters will be evicted. Housing benefits run to £87 a week and the rents on the newly restored properties will be £380 a month, with council tax and utilities payments on top. The trust reckons that tenants will have to be earning at least £590 a month to be able to afford to live there.

Big Local has also spent money installing CCTV cameras, replacing leaking drainpipes and erecting hanging baskets (with artificial flowers) to brighten up the streets and vie with the satellite dishes on the walls. A grassed children’s play area with wooden climbing frames is being constructed on the site of a former cinema.

Ironically, crime figures have gone up since the installation of cameras, but there is hope in that—more crimes are being reported and solved because of them. They helped to sort out one scam locally: cars that had been stolen from across the country were being driven to a collection point at a service station on the M1, where they were picked up by a gang who drove them back to North Ormesby and stripped and then burned the vehicle carcasses.

Ask the Rev. Dominic Black, who has been the vicar of

Holy Trinity for the last fourteen years and chairs the Big Local project, about the local authority and he starts to speak about fending off officials with lanyards: “The council do try and take over. They don’t get that this is a project which works from the bottom up.” He and his board have just spent more than a year wrangling with officialdom to sort out ownership and responsibility and get the play area built. We watched as workmen constructed a four-foot high fence around it, and then returned to the community housing office, where the Big Local administration is based, to discover that insurers were insisting that the fence had to be six feet high and the area would need constant adult supervision. “We’re not building a prison!” Dominic exclaimed.

He is philosophical about what can be done: “People thought it was going to be a cash bonanza. Hundreds turned up to the consultation meeting and talked about ways to make the area better—they wanted to strengthen the community. There is still that feeling—people came to the consultation with answers. Instead of the council taking decisions we were interviewing them in our space, on our ground. They had to listen because the people were setting the agenda. That doesn’t mean the lanyards stop trying, of course.

“You have to convince people that they can make a difference. Nay- saying can be a form of defence. Not working together is not an option. When we started, 77% of young people said they saw no future staying in the community. Now we are getting people involved, putting power back into the community, changing the reputation of the area.”

Dominic’s is not the only church locally—there is a Catholic church and a Hindu temple—but while not antagonistic to Big Local, they tend to minister primarily to their own flocks. The Church of England is different, he

maintains, because of how it sees the world and its sense of responsibility for all the souls of the parish. “We are there for everyone anyway, irrespective of whether they come to church. It’s what we do.

“I see it as integral to being a vicar. It makes sense: I see the Good News encompassing body and spirit—life in all its fullness. I want the people of the parish to live in decent homes in a good community—it is all of a piece to me. There is a very heavy pastoral burden here and one of the first lessons is that you cannot solve every problem. We don’t have a magic wand to make things better. What faith groups do is offer hope in the face of what otherwise might be a hopeless situation.

“I am no fan of the National Lottery—we reckon several times the amount of money leaves the community as comes back to it. It’s a form of poor tax. It is not the only form of gambling, but there’s a degree of pragmatism—better to do some good.”

His congregation and church attendance has not grown since Big Local—it remains about fifty on a Sunday—but its character has changed partly because of the influx of asylum seekers and immigrants: it has become both younger and more diverse. “I have buried a lot of elderly white people. Nowadays it sometimes feels as though I am probably baptising more Iranians than locals, but the immigrant population is transient: as soon as they get established they move on, to Manchester or Leeds. About a third of the population here changes every year.

“In the Church of England these days success is all in numbers, but we are never going to do terribly well with those statistics here.”



CHAPTER FIVE

Greenmoor, Bradford

“Faith is the catalyst to enabling and improving the community.”

“RELIGION IS ONE OF THE MOTIVATORS of volunteering. We give our time as a religious duty”, said Abbas Najib, chairman of Greenmoor Big Local. “There is a belief that the Almighty appreciates activism in the community. It’s part of the motivation to get involved and effect change.”

Greenmoor Big Local is made up of two working-class suburbs due west of Bradford city centre: Lidget Green, whose residents are now almost entirely Muslim, and Scholemoor, about two thirds of whose residents are of Asian heritage: not just Muslims but also Sikhs and Hindus, whose arrival in the city in the 1960s and ’70s was prompted by the opportunity for work in the area’s textile mills. Some of the now elderly women from Gujerat, who meet every week in a church hall for a social get-together of Hindu residents, still do not speak much English after spending fifty years in the country. They

need companionship but also medical services and public transport, which are both in short supply locally these days.

At neighbouring Scholemoor, an inter-war working class estate made up mainly of family homes with large gardens, which was originally built as a gesture towards the ‘homes fit for heroes’ policy, there is now food and fuel poverty—the Salvation Army, which does not accept Big Local money, hands out tokens for gas meters. There is integration, but it can be wary— or perhaps it is more a case of timing: white children go to after-school clubs at precisely the same time as Muslim children go to their madrassahs.

Both suburbs have characteristic rows of dark stone, Victorian terraced houses. There are shops and schools and the relatively new Khidmat sports and leisure centre, with its mix of health and wellbeing sessions, its badminton and karate classes, indoor and outdoor soccer, and a walking track around the playing field outside where women can safely stroll. And of course, like other Big Local areas, it has its share of crime and anti-social behaviour. Someone called Tony is a prolific illegal tagger of local walls, though he lacks the wit or finesse of Banksy.

The Rev. John Bavington, vicar of St Wilfrid’s, the local Anglican parish church, has had his windows broken three times and stones thrown at him when he was sweeping the vicarage drive, and has had to break up a gang fight outside—and he has only been in post for a few months. “I think there’s a sense of rootlessness among young people here”, he said. Maybe that just shows that community spirit still has a way to go.

But, unlike in some other areas, the young and upwardly mobile have not moved out of the area. Family and community loyalties have kept them closer to home. Abbas Nijab himself is

a former police officer and trained lawyer. Others on the board include thirty-something business people and accountants with experience in the corporate world and the initiative and ability to drive projects forward. The board has a majority Muslim membership, and the meeting I attended was lively and good natured, with Yorkshire voices debating whether it was worth keeping local city councillors as members when they never attended meetings—the impression being that they were surplus to requirements if they could not be bothered to turn up. “We are still all highly concentrated in the community”, said Abbas. “It provides a sense of belonging and support.”

The project has management support from CNET, Bradford’s community empowerment network, and other sources—even Yorkshire County Cricket Club, once notoriously slow to engage with the talented, enthusiastic young Asian cricketers in its area, is setting up a cricketing nursery at the Khidmat centre.

Abbas grumbles that the terms of the Big Local project were too vague to start with: there was a lack of guidance from the centre, too much patronising, “have a go, it’s OK to fail”. The Greenmoor board could work that out for themselves: they are not into small gestures but long-term planning for the local community and have a clear idea of what projects will work for residents. “We are strict about what we approve: if we are underspent so far, so be it. We won’t accept every project that is put forward.”

Six task groups were formed, planning projects to improve community cohesion, support local investment to boost the area’s economy, lobby for improved health facilities—get back a doctors’ surgery and dental practice—and promote healthy activities—not only sports facilities where they have

just spent £30,000 on lighting for the outdoor walking track, but also allotments and community gardens to make the area tidier. They also want to expand youth activities to increase youngsters' say in their area (without resorting to stones) and engage with the East Europeans who have moved in locally. Among the visible achievements has been the creation of a memorial garden on a stretch of waste land next to the parish church to commemorate local people who died in the 20th century's world wars, an IT club for older people, yoga sessions and a pathway-to-work project advising the unemployed.

These aren't exclusive projects, but a way of openly demonstrating the communities' integration. Media attacks on British Muslims understandably irk Abbas: "Are we going to be blamed for moving into this community? They tell us we ought to integrate but how integrated do we have to be to show we belong here? Is it our fault if white people have moved away? Do we need to be seen drinking beer and eating bacon sandwiches? Just which are the British values exactly that I am not supposed to agree with?"

Nirmal Singh, a Bradford businessman who chairs the Yorkshire Sikh Forum, said: "In 1964 when my family arrived, there was one Sikh temple in a private house. Now there are seven gurdwarahs, each of which has been a £500,000 investment. That's a sign of our belonging and the maturity of our community. We collaborate: Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus together. Our children are educated in local schools together. We are not going anywhere—we are here to stay. We have put in a lot of hard work here." Certainly Nirmal has: his housing portfolio now runs to hundreds of properties.

The instinct for integration is evident at the Khidmat Centre, which has benefitted from projects funded by

Big Local. Ishtiaq Ahmed, the director, who also sits on Interfaith Bradford and the Muslim Council of Britain, said: "My faith encompasses my identity. Anything I do or say is informed and inspired by faith. Faith is the catalyst to enabling and improving the community and allowing it to fulfil its aspirations and ambitions, but that can only happen if communities take responsibility and become involved.

"Bradford has been described as a city of domes, minarets and gurdwarahs. We have all impacted on the landscape of the city. We are like a family—we don't need to get together all the time, we live in parallel. The Big Local has brought resources into our area and improved facilities around here; more importantly, it has galvanised the community. We want to be active participants in improving our area permanently—that is its most lasting contribution."

Nevertheless, the acceptance of lottery money is perhaps more problematic here than in the other areas I visited. The centre's general manager would not allow himself to be quoted and will not appear in photographs where the words Big Local are mentioned because of the connection with gambling. Ishtiaq said: "Lottery money is not acceptable for ethical reasons. Mosques here would not apply for money, but we support the benefit to the community that it brings."



CONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH SUPERFICIALLY ALL THE PROJECTS mentioned in this report are similar— because Big Local is targeted at deprived communities which have previously lost out on National Lottery funding and which are perceived to need an infusion of money to foster long-term improvements—each is tackling specific problems that their local communities perceive to be priorities for their area. In Palfrey it is improving the environment, at Grace Mary to Lion Farm fostering community, Collyhurst is tackling debt, North Ormesby is trying to sort out housing and Greenmoor is working on integration.

All say they have similar issues: anti-social behaviour, poor facilities, poverty and deprivation, that local people want tackled and that hard-pressed local authorities are not able to overcome in current circumstances.

What these projects also have in common is the close involvement of faith groups in helping to organise and lead their Big Locals. This is partly because such groups remain at the centre of their communities, and partly because, for the most part, they can provide both the facilities—church halls, community centres— and the initiative and drive in areas where it is lacking.

One of the vicars I spoke to said: “My building is one of the few community facilities available to local residents. Big Local gelled with my sense of bringing everyone together, but in this community for me one of the biggest drawbacks is the lack of education among the under 35s. They have levels of apathy and negativity I have found almost impossible to break through.

“People here find paperwork and organisation difficult. I qualify as a resident and have skill sets that are difficult to find in others round here, so I had to take it on. I love the people here, but we have been overwhelmed by the level of need.” It is very marked that the project which is the most energetic and ambitious in many ways is that at Greenmoor because it is partly directed by young Muslim professionals who still live locally.

One of the main charges made by critics of faith groups is that of proselytisation and indoctrination: a criticism often levelled at church schools, though without much justification (pupils who have been educated at such schools are no more likely to become churchgoers in adulthood than anyone else). It is an easy target, based probably on isolated instances usually drawn from the extremes of American evangelicalism. Notably here, all the faith-group individuals I spoke to disavowed any such intention. Their motivation, Christian and Muslim alike, was internal to themselves: they wanted

to volunteer their help to the communities where they live. There was no suggestion that I saw of the faith groups treating Big Local in the same way as some conservative evangelicals cynically view the Church of England as no more than ‘a convenient boat to fish from’.

If anything, says the Rev. Al Barrett, who chairs the Big Local project called Firs and Bromford in Hodge Hill, on the east side of inner-city Birmingham, the million-pound grant has been a hindrance and distraction. It was initially regarded by some locals with suspicion: a bonanza which the church would gobble up. “We had a struggle to persuade people that we were not interested in the money”, he told me. “We have been encouraged to put power in the hands of local people, and over time that has been liberating and energising.

“What we are interested in is building the local community across genders, faiths and generations. Perceptions have changed as they see we are not arguing about it for the church, but with our neighbourhood and residential hats on. Invariably, I start meetings saying first that I am a resident, then a neighbour and only thirdly a vicar. It is not semantics—we are not there as an institution, but as friends, building relationships first.

“When I came here eight years ago I was keen to help the local church to be engaged in the neighbourhood. Traditionally our parish has been at the more affluent end of our neighbourhood, expecting people to come to us. Instead of luring people into the building I have felt my calling has been to be round the housing estates, listening to people and connecting them together, and that has influenced our understanding of Big Local.”

The statistics of attendance at the churches involved in Big Local show there has been no real change from before:

no upswing in evangelisation, and any increase in their congregations seems to have come largely from migrants and asylum seekers, not from an uptake in conversions caused by their engagement in the project. Any rise in numbers in church has only marginally stemmed long-term decline, though it may have reduced the age profile of attendees.

This may, or may not, be the case also with mosques and gurdwarahs. Religious observance may give ethnic minorities a sense of identity as part of their community, but historically such ties tend to diminish among second and third generations after immigration. Nirmal Singh in Bradford said: “I worry that in twenty or thirty years’ time our children could lose their faith.”

Big Locals are, of course, secular projects: political or religious partisan purposes are not permitted. The most that people of faith can do is show by example. As the Rev. Chris Allen said at the Grace Mary project: “There is no view to bring people in, but research would indicate there will be church growth in the longer term.” His evangelical colleague Pete Hayward added: “There is a Biblical warrant for showing meaning to the community. One of the best things is seeing people’s potential, bringing them out and seeing changes in them. We give a sense of belonging and value. If they come to church that’s great. If they don’t come that’s OK too.” His church has grown through social activism, such as its help for asylum seekers, and perhaps the vibrancy of its services.

I did ask the people I spoke to about their personal faith, the nature of their Christianity or Muslim or Sikh identity, but not about their attitudes to controversial faith debates: about abortion or same-sex relationships. Such things seemed very introspective and political—far-removed and irrelevant from their engagement in Big Local. Where their faith does

cause them concerns in relation to the project is the source of its funding. None approved of the National Lottery as a matter of principle (and only one of those I spoke to, Colleen Jones at Palfrey, admitted to having a flutter herself) but most reconciled their engagement as returning value and resources for the benefit of their communities.

Has Big Local made a difference? Clearly, it has helped people in its areas with advice centres, community events and projects. It has made residents feel safer and has started to beautify their surroundings—or at least encouraged them to pick up their litter. It has given them a say in their neighbourhoods and it may even have produced lasting changes in attitudes and engagement—time will tell. Faith groups are playing a significant part in this because they feel they should as citizens, not as Christians or Muslims. The projects are not expected to increase religious devotion, nor should they—and almost certainly, nor have they, beyond, perhaps, showing by example how to be concerned for the wellbeing of others and the improvement of their lives without doing it for reward. That is enough.

A last word to Al Barrett: “As a clergyman you are always told not to make friends with parishioners but to lead and be a figurehead. But I see my job as to make friends and to help others to make friends among their neighbours – to create space, and that does not need Big Local money.”

