

What is a community audit and how do you conduct one?

At its most basic, a community audit is simply about listening to those you live amongst and who you want to connect with. For most Christian communities that can mean the whole population of the area where they are based. However, some faith communities will normally only be seeking to connect to a certain section of that population. The principles outlined below can be adapted to suit various situations.

Why is it important?

The main aim of a community audit is to better understand the wider community in which a faith community is set. Many faith communities start with the idea that they already know their community well. In fact evidence and experience gathered in community development work supports the importance of a proper community audit. If conducted effectively, it can provide important new information and represent value for money and time well spent.

The idea of a community audit can be daunting to anyone not familiar with the concepts involved. The good news for most situations is that the information you need already exists, it is simply a matter of finding it.

What does a community audit cover?

The starting point of an audit is to be clear about what you are seeking to understand about your community. There lots of statistics readily available so it is critical to keep checking back to your agreed aim. During the life of a project it is normal for your aim to be refined and changed in the light of how things develop.

Probably the most common (and most simple) audit looks at the profile of the population by age and gender. This can then be compared with the profile of the faith community to identify any clear differences between the two and suggest where a project or outreach programme might be needed.

In a recent audit of a large and thriving Baptist Church, there was a clear gap between the number of 20-29 year-old males in the congregation and the number of 20–29 year-old males in the local population. Knowing about this gap challenged the church to re-shape some of their activities to meet the needs of this subgroup.

A critical factor to remember is that no faith community can possibly do everything, or reach the whole community. In fact, the Growing Healthy Churches principles outlined by Springboard in 2003 include 'doing less things better'.

Many faith-based community development projects are not underpinned by good quality data about the community. Often these projects have been developed out of perceived needs and opportunities of the community without these needs and opportunities being checked against the actual population.

Key questions that need to be answered from a community audit:

- Are the needs and opportunities as significant in our community as we think?
- What is the evidence of these needs and opportunities?
- Who else is concerned with (or actively involved in) meeting the needs of the suggested target group?
- Is there any overlap or conflict of interest with what is already being done and what we are proposing to do?

Asking such questions should produce a conclusion that leads to the design of a suitable project. Alternatively, as the following illustrations show, it may lead to partnership working.

Possil Park

While conducting an audit on behalf of a church in Possil Park, I discovered that the offices of the local Community Planning Partnership were just round the corner. The CPP is the body responsible in that locality for disbursing Scottish Executive funding for regeneration of deprived communities (as identified by Communities Scotland, the agency responsible for managing these funds).

So I went with the assistant minister to meet Margaret Daly last week. Margaret is the gatekeeper of the CPP in that area. It turns out that she was a Christian who had thought that our shop-front church was actually a loan company, even though she had driven past it every day for six months. She was immediately interested to find out that this church had a thriving project working with local addicts and quite a reputation with other service providers in the area for connecting with people that were otherwise 'off the radar'.

Margaret immediately offered the chance to apply for money from the Executive to help us conduct a feasibility study into our project. She even offered to give us a list of consultants to employ who would be sympathetic to the church's Christian ethos. This is exactly what was needed at this stage as we set out to establish the existing work as a fundable and sustainable project to connect with the most vulnerable members of the local community.

Just one visit has established the church on the local map of government funding and raised its profile immeasurably. A great result from an exploratory audit, along with a bit of brass-neck rooted in prayer and a personal visit. Be encouraged!

(Ede P, www.urbanexpression.org.uk, January 2017)

The Valley Park Healthy Living Centre Project

The Valley Park and Cherry Trees Estates are two adjoining areas of housing in the borough of Croydon, built in the mid 1990s. Valley Park units are housing association-owned social housing, while Cherry Trees is owner occupied. The estates were built without provision for community facilities.

It is widely recognised that there are issues of poor mental health and low self-esteem among the residents of the Valley Park Estate. In addition there are a number of lone parents. To meet these needs a Healthy Living Centre was developed on land between the two estates, funded by £360K from the Single Regeneration Budget, £100k from Sure Start and £100k from other statutory sources.

The contribution of the local church to this work began in 1999, when church members undertook a community survey which identified the need for community facilities—in part to be met by the new Centre—and the need for a community shop offering basic goods. The research led to the setting up of a Valley Park residents' association to work with the existing

association on the Cherry Trees Estate. The local church supported the association and contributed to social activities including summer activities for children.

With SRB funding a community shop opened in November 2001. Any profits made by the shop were ploughed back into the community. The proposed Healthy Living Centre opened in the summer of 2003, with the local Church of England Parish Church as a member of the management committee. New Opportunities funding was used to appoint a worker to build links with residents, working closely with the curate of the parish church and the staff of the health centre to develop community activities and networks.

The project is an example of a partnership that developed between the local authority, the health authority, local residents and the local church, all of whom have played a role in taking the project forward.

(From *Regenerating London: Faith communities and social action: A report by the London Churches Group for Social Action and Greater London Enterprise, October 2002*)

What are the steps of a community audit?

In *Community Audit Steps* (Urban Ministry, Harvey/Conn, Chapter 15), J Lingenfelter suggests:

1. Contacting the population—where are the public spaces where people gather?
2. Defining population divisions and characteristics through mapping, observation and interviewing.
3. Assessing population routines and opportunities for witness by observing such things as time, space, activity, events, actors, goals and feelings.
4. Learning the experiential and linguistic context for witness through grand tour questions, structural questions, and contrast interviewing.
5. Analysing social organisation and leadership patterns through networks, associations, and groups to target people of influence and develop witness strategies for them.
6. Analysing values and features of worldviews that provide obstacles and opportunities for response to the gospel.

(Most Christian community audits only manage to make a start with number 6 as it is a long and complex process.)

Questions to ask

1. Community history:
How has the present community been shaped by its past— social, political, demographic, and otherwise?. What have been the turning points?
2. Physical layout:
What are the physical boundaries, significant buildings, types of housing, unique architectural features, important geographic landmarks, major transportation links, and locations of jobs? How do people define the geographic boundaries of their community? Where are the communities 'within' the community?
3. Neighbourhood assets and resources:
What are the existing and potential strengths, capacities, 'competitive advantages', and other assets of the community? What have been the past successes of the community?
4. Indicators of need:

In what ways is the community marginalised or distressed? What is the health status and economic profile of the community? What are the felt needs of the community? What do the people of the community see as the real issues?

5. Institutional elements:
What organisations and agencies provide services and programmes within the community? How are they perceived? Where are their operations conducted? What are their long-term plans?
6. Community dynamics:
What are the internal and external dynamics that help to drive community life? Who are the neighbourhood opinion makers and stakeholders? What are the local 'political' dynamics? Who is looked to for leadership?
7. Religious institutions:
What other congregations are present in the community? What is their role and ministry involvement in the community? What activities do other religious groups conduct?
8. Neighbouring dynamics:
What are the existing webs of extended family and friendship networks? What role do neighbourhood associations and other civic groups play within the community? What are the hopes, dreams, concerns, and driving themes of life in the community?

A comprehensive community audit (CCA)

- is obviously beyond the resources of a faith community to undertake on their own. However, public bodies are constantly collecting data and this then often becomes freely available to others. Reasons for undertaking a community audit are numerous and varied but can include all or some of the following:

- To provide a baseline of information about the community.
- To hold policy makers accountable.
- To evidence a need or needs.
- To give feedback to service providers on customer satisfaction.
- To inform strategy development, within the local community or on a wider level.
- To inform the allocation of resources by agencies.
- To evaluate the relevance of activities or services.
- To facilitate community development.

A comprehensive community audit needs to:

- Be comprehensive— issues interact together and a comprehensive community audit can help to challenge a piecemeal response.
- Describe needs and resources (physical and skills) within the community— this will give a true reflection of the community.
- Lead to an action plan which seeks to improve the quality of life— otherwise a community audit serves no useful purpose in its own right.

In some cases, a faith community can participate in a comprehensive community audit directly because it will be seen as a useful stakeholder to partner with and this should be welcomed. If the local profile of the faith community is strong and the commitment to community development clear, this is more likely.

Conducting a community audit

Primary information collected can be both quantitative (numbers in categories, statistics etc.) and qualitative (ideas about feelings, behaviours, aspirations etc.)

Primary information should reflect:

- The history of the community.
- Trends that can be identified over given periods of time.
- A real sense of place.
- An accurate description of community resources. For example, population, statistics, level of public transport provision and other services etc.
- The level of community needs.

Where can I find information?

Although there is a lot of information available, it may not be in the form you want and you may have to adapt or interpret information. For most purposes faith communities can use the 'best fit' that is available. Your local council(s) website(s) are an excellent place to start but other public bodies e.g. the Police or Health Service are also good sources. Be prepared to make a number of visits and phone calls. It will be worth it as people are normally very helpful.

A lot of information is available through www.statistics.gov.uk and www.cuf/lookup-tool (January 2017)

If the area you are working in— or intend to work in— has some clear social needs, it is more likely that further information is available.

Sometimes the area or group of people you have identified to work with is too small or diverse to 'show up' in the public statistics. These statistics for your area still have a use though; they can provide the basis for comparison with the area or group you want to work with. In Britain the most extreme example comes from work with the Traveller community, which frequently escapes the net of 'normal' statistical analysis.

In these cases there is often the need to prepare a questionnaire to target your specific area or group. Designing and getting responses to these are time consuming but most faith communities can inspire volunteers to help with a 'one-off' exercise. When negotiating with funders and partners this sort of first-hand data is often priceless.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are probably the best way to get a representative sample of views and data from a community. A questionnaire is a way of collecting information in a standard format and can be used in a number of different ways. You can ask people to complete it themselves (delivered and returned by post or by hand) or you can use the questions as an interview script. It is important to get the design right and only collect the information you need.

If the questionnaire is not going to be given to the whole population you are interested in then the sample selected must be representative of the composition of the whole community. Sampling can affect the validity and reliability of the information received so a cross-section of the population and a geographical spread is necessary to ensure that the sample is representative.

The community audit group needing information need to be clear about the issues they want covered and the information they need from the questionnaire. Do they want facts, attitudes, opinions or suggestions from the survey? There are lots of online resources available to help the

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group design questions although maybe someone in the group, or a friend of the group has experience creating this sort of survey?

The questionnaire can be targeted at either individuals or households within the designated area. Again this is a choice, which the audit group need to make in order to ensure they get the information that is most important for their needs. The length of the survey questionnaire and its presentation are important. It must be easy to fill out otherwise people are more likely to discard it. The instructions for completing the questionnaire and a statement ensuring confidentiality must be clearly written on the questionnaire.