

Tips for churches working with local authorities

Tips were provided by those working in churches and local authorities, who came together for the Welcoming Families, Transforming Lives event, October 2021

Q - I haven't had much contact with my local authority and understand that every local authority seems to be different. How can I find out about how my local authority is structured, how it operates and who to contact?

- Try looking on the website, although council websites aren't the best at explaining their structures to the public!
- Look at local authorities' early help strategy. All local authorities have an early help plan of some form, and this can be a great place to start formulating your own strategy.
- Do you or anyone in your Church have any contacts through your day-to-day work/lives (licensing, building control, planning, social care)? Explain to them what you do and that you'd like to open up a conversation – they will then point you towards the right person.
- Contact your local Ward Member or Council Leader (Ward Members will be listed on the Council Website). Remember some areas are Two Tier (District and County) so you need to look at both Councils
- Some government led programmes are looking to support existing community led programmes to better support families, for example the Supporting Families Programme (formerly 'Troubled Families Programme'). This can be another inroad to partnering if you are struggling to find a good way in with your local authority.
- Researching and asking questions are vital to success.

Q - Thinking specifically about Family Hubs (i.e. those providing family support), who should I contact in my local authority? Am I looking for a certain job title or team?

- Write to the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council. All local authorities are structured differently so it's not always easy to find the most appropriate person. A CEO/Leader's PA will always pass on your letter or email to the correct officer/councillor
- Director of Children's Services, Head of Early Help, Councillor with responsibility for children and families may all be useful start points
- You can email your local MP as they may well have specific contacts in the Councils that cover their constituency.
- Look at who you know in your church congregation who may already be connected with your local authority. Relationships are the best way to establish partnership, and utilising existing relationships to build new ones is a great place to start.

Q - Can you give me tips about getting started in building a relationship with my local authority?

- Invite the CEO/Leader to visit. Tell them what you do and what you can offer to the community. Show them round and introduce them to staff, volunteers, members. Show them visible projects that are making a difference (food bank, toddler group etc). Councils are really stretched at the moment so they will always be grateful for any good work going on in their community. Councils love working in partnership, so don't be afraid to reach out.
- Look on the council's website for their Corporate Plan and/or Corporate Priorities. Remind them how your work is meeting these (it won't be difficult because all councils have priorities around supporting people in their community etc. You may find you meet lots of them). Give them some examples of projects you're doing or people you're supporting that meet the Council's objectives.
- Highlight issues that you are encountering through your church community (Debt? Poverty? Transport? Access to healthcare?). Councils cover such a wide range of things, and if it's not on their to-do list they will always signpost you to another organisation who can help. Councils are good for networking.
- Avoid getting drawn into politics or worrying about pleasing different political parties or certain people. Stick to what you do and tell them positively about it. Council members and officers often change so don't pin your colours to the mast with anyone, remain neutral but open & flexible to new ideas or ways of doing things.
- It's important for churches to appreciate that local authorities have a huge responsibility to the people they are working with in their constituency, often the most vulnerable people and families in a community. It's not a given that they will be eager at first to work with churches, or that trust will exist from the get-go. Trust has to be built. By being professional, patient and persistent, trust can be established and often times it just takes waiting for the right door to open, or finding the right person to talk to.
- At times, your public sector colleagues may feel nervous of church-based initiatives as they may feel it is more about 'bums on seats' than serving the community; they may feel the vulnerable could be taken advantage of. If you are willing to engage with the local authority and take onboard some of the probing questions, this will build trust and open doors to serve that would otherwise have been shut. Engaging is the only way to overcome the barriers of distrust that can exist in local and public community settings.
- Working in partnership with local authorities can be a powerful avenue for change in our communities. Local authorities will likely know you pray about people and situations, within projects, and will probably just not want that written down in public records. Engaging with local authorities doesn't have to mean stopping spiritual activity. It might just mean being willing to have the conversation as to how this works out in practice. Similarly, when sharing faith, councils will probably only be averse to pushing faith and prayer on visitors to Family Hubs, but should visitors ask about why you do what you do, then tell them.

- Relationships, relationships, relationships – play the long game!
- Ask your public sector leaders and council ‘What keeps you awake at night?’ And ask of yourselves, ‘What can we do to help? How can we be part of the solution?’ Do your research and find out what needs are currently not being met, and then meet them!
- Understand the unique things that your church brings to your community, that your local authority can’t.
- Stick to your strengths! Ask what you are already offering in your community and then build on that. Local authorities are looking to strengthen established community led support as much as they are looking to start new initiatives.
- Find out about what is already happening in your community and get involved – this can be a great place to start, especially for a new project.
- Community Facebook groups can be depressing to read at times but they can provide real insight as to how your church can help when you hear what people are complaining about!

Q - Can you give me tips about churches and local authorities working together?

- Churches and local authorities have the same fundamental goal, to help and serve people and families. Partnering is most effective when churches operate in the areas they are best equipped in, and refer to their local authority when circumstances require. This can be a very mutually supportive relationship if you’re willing to put the work in.
- Avoid chasing funding that doesn’t fit with your values – it’s always good to be open and flexible but don’t change what you do to suit short term aims of certain people or funders – you can get blown off course and then have to work hard to get back on track.
- Establishing your church as a CIO can be one way of maintaining the spiritual oversight of the church whilst also engaging with the community in a more professional capacity. All service level agreements can then be between the Local Council and the church, or the local Housing Authority and the church. It is possible to do both! Make it your priority to get involved with the local authorities to primarily build and strengthen relationships.
- Not many people like paperwork! But although recording your work can seem daunting at first, after a period of time you can look back at the analysis and assessment you’ve carried out and see that a body of evidence and proof of outcomes has built up that can be an incredibly powerful tool in future work.
- Rather than running events for the sake of running events, listen to the tune the community is whistling to, and then bring the faith contribution of the church into that tune.

- Partnering with local authorities can open up doors to funding that would otherwise be shut, as need is verified and validated from multiple sources. However, once money and funding are involved so will the need arise for proof of outcomes and tracking of performance, so give plenty of thought to what you provide and whether you seek funding for it. Getting paid for your work significantly ramps up the level of accountability and expectation.
- Working in partnership may feel as if it could become restrictive but it can be liberating, because everyone knows where they stand and how things work in different settings. Control isn't taken away but churches need to be open to conversation and some give and take in relation to practice.

Q - From a local authority point of view, what are the benefits of working with churches specifically? And are there any barriers?

- Access to families who would otherwise be unreachable, and credibility in the community can be gained, as a result of partnership with local authorities.
- Churches are consistently there! Local authorities are in need of the consistent support churches can provide.
- Local authorities can look at churches as a ready-made resource in the community, with access to people and families they previously couldn't reach – a highly cost-effective solution in an area with often limited funding. Plus, this can result in earlier intervention with vulnerable individuals, which can result in more effective outcomes.
- Partnering with local authorities can open up training and development opportunities, plus a wealth of learning and knowledge sharing as to how to deal with the difficult circumstances and conversations that will undoubtedly come up when running a Family Hub.
- Some councils may be a bit wary of working too closely with specific denominations or churches as councils are publicly funded and have to meet the needs of everyone in their area. However, most councils will recognise that churches can engage with and reach people in their community that the council can't reach, so there are real benefits of building up that trust and mutual understanding of how each other work. A good council will recognise the positive benefits of working with a range of churches to support different people in their community.
- Don't be put off by barriers you encounter. Local Authorities can be a bit bureaucratic but there's normally a way round them through positive engagement and a bit of persistence!