



The Archbishops’ Commission on Families and Household undertook its first evidence-gathering visit on Thursday 2nd September, visiting the London Borough of Newham.

Hosted by the Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, five Commissioners – Professor Janet Walker OBE, Rt Revd Paul Butler, Bishop of Durham, Dez Brown, Revd Dr Julie Gittoes, and Dr Elaine Storkey – were taken to a wide range of community projects which aim to support families and households in various ways. Newham claims to be the most ethnically diverse community on the planet, with over 150 languages spoken. It is an area of high deprivation with high levels of unemployment, homelessness, and a lack of affordable housing, which results in severe household overcrowding. Moreover, over 50 per cent of the children live in poverty.



Nevertheless, it was, as promised by Stephen Timms on arrival, a hopeful visit, as Commissioners were invited to hear stories of innovative

community projects and see resilient family life in the face of challenges that have exacerbated by the pandemic, including food poverty, issues relating to insecure immigration status, and social isolation.

Ascension Church, the first stop on our visit, was true to its strapline: 'a church in the community, for the community'. Building on a heritage that includes teaching children to swim in the early 20th century in order to survive life around the docks, the vicar, Revd Dave Chesney, and the CEO of Ascension Community Trust, Hannah Tulloch, talked about the varied work of the church and its charitable organisation. Their focus is on four areas: children and families; elderly people; people facing poverty; and people with complex needs, including mental health challenges and learning difficulties. Ascension Community Trust employs external advisers who offer advice to clients on housing and benefits, and draws in volunteers who live locally. Commissioners heard from a single mother who described the different skills she had learned and the confidence she had gained through volunteering with the after-school club, and the opportunities it had provided her son to participate in organised activities free of charge. Ascension Community Trust became heavily involved in the local Mutual Aid Group in March 2020 and, having successfully started a food bank two weeks into the pandemic, was asked by the council to offer emergency provision on Saturdays. In June 2021 it became a member of the Trussell Trust, and the aim is to include other churches in the community in this work.

A short walk away, Ascension Community Trust runs the 'Green Community Café', described by Hannah as 'the place to go if you're not sure where to go for something'. The café has been used previously for projects such as guitar lessons, work placements for adults with learning difficulties, and will host a youth centre for after school activities. Hannah shared a number of testimonies, including from a regular local who said: 'meeting people here makes me feel like an accepted member of the community'.

After coffee and delicious cakes, the Commissioners were ready to move on to visit a new community partnership based at Alternatives in Plaistow. This partnership includes the National Childbirth Trust (NCT), Alternatives Trust East London and the Magpie Project based in Forest Gate. The partnership has been awarded a grant from the Government's Health and Wellbeing Fund to reduce health inequalities for mothers in Newham, some 66 per cent of whom are born outside the UK. The Alternatives Trust is a charity which began in a local church to support mothers and their children with counselling, guidance and advocacy. It mainly supports women who have experienced homelessness or domestic violence, and aims to build self-esteem and offers professional counselling. The Magpie Project provides a safe space for mothers with a child under five, at risk of homelessness or living in insecure accommodation, to receive housing and immigration advice whilst their children are looked after. The NCT supports mothers to offer peer support to other mothers from conception through to two years, in fifteen different languages. The support is open and inclusive, and the mothers include refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers. The services are co-designed with the mothers and are being externally evaluated. The NCT is also piloting training for fathers. Together, these organisations deal with a range of

sensitive issues facing mothers, including homelessness, domestic violence, and insecure immigration status. During the visit Commissioners had the opportunity to meet with mothers who have accessed services through the community partnership, as well as some who now serve on the steering group of Newham Nurture, which helps to make services for mothers as accessible as possible. The mothers spoke positively about the ways in which their lives had been turned around and, as one single mother told us: ‘if Mum is happy, children have a better future; the support offered to immigrants results in healthy, happy kids’.

The next stop was at Bonny Downs Community Association (BDCA), a project of Bonny Downs Baptist Church which, among other services, offers a family hub to provide food and community support to over 200 parents and their children each week. BDCA offers help with immigration advice and – with the new school term just beginning – had a uniform bank laid out in the room. In January 2021, along with the foodbank, BDCA launched ‘Family Fuelbank’ to follow up with families accessing the food bank in order to explore the underlying reasons for their visit through a 1:1 appointment to discuss wider poverty challenges. In the first two months, they had seen 70 families. BDCA has recently completed its £400,000 project for a new nursery area, with 43 places available for nursery children with working parents. Commissioners enjoyed meeting families and sampling the chicken biryani lunch prepared by local families who receive support from BDCA's family hub.

After lunch, Commissioners joined a roundtable with community leaders, organisations and stakeholders. Chaired by Stephen Timms, a rich discussion focused on the four areas of particular investigation by the Commission: how theology informs our understanding of families and households; the social history of families and households up to the present day; children and young people; and couples, marriage and cohabiting relationships. The religious diversity within Newham was generally seen as a positive influence within the borough, with children and young people growing up with valuable awareness and greater understanding of different traditions and cultures. There was also recognition of the misuse of religion and tradition, for example women being advised by faith leaders to remain in abusive relationships, and the stigma around single parenthood. On the whole family life is very important in most faith communities and the faith organisations foster a sense of belonging. The closure of places of worship during the pandemic caused a problem for families.

It was noted that the idea of a school running a foodbank or counselling services would have been unthinkable ten years ago, and the fact that this has been normalised is a manifestation of the increased need in recent years. A conversation took place about the need to tackle violence affecting young people and to address the root causes of postcode wars, such as the socio-economic conditions particularly the pressures on single parent households, issues around violence in communities and weapons and status, and the need for robust early intervention within schools and in regard to the curriculum and what is being taught in schools that can better prepare children to be able to flourish.

Commissioners heard the about the lived experience of gang violence from one young man and another who had set up a street gym for young

people. The attendees shared information about the initiatives they were working on to tackle some of the problems, and there was a general recognition of the need for more support and more joined-up working. Contact details were shared and a commitment to work more closely together.

After the round table meeting, Commissioners had the privilege of meeting two families who had come to the UK from different countries. They welcome us into their homes, and told us what it is like to live and raise a family in Newham. The conversations with the first family focused on the challenges caused by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition imposed on people without indefinite leave to remain in the UK. This caused particular problems at the beginning of the pandemic for many people who had no access to Universal Credit despite this family having lived and worked in England for 20 years and their children having been born here. This family's faith had supported them through a very difficult period, which included the struggles to pay the rent during the pandemic. The visit concluded with Bishop Paul leading us all in prayer.

The next family who welcomed us spoke about identity issues for the children of first-generation immigrants growing up in Newham, and the sense of feeling at home in the UK whilst also mindful of a missing part of heritage. One of the children had won a prize for a speech she had written entitled 'The Unheard Voices of Conflict' about the difficulties in the family's country of origin which had led to her parents move to England and her need to understand her cultural heritage. Commissioners were treated to a beautiful rendition of this speech, which was intensely informative and moving. We could have stayed much longer to enjoy the food that the family had prepared for us, but were given plates of food to enjoy on our minibus.

Our final stop took us to the Renewal Programme, a 50-year-old charity established by URC churches in Newham. Peter Laing, the CEO, and the Renewal Programme team informed Commissioners about their work providing immigration advice at the outbreak of the pandemic to provide support for people with NRPF, particularly international students who found themselves unable to work in the hospitality sector as a means to pay for their rent. The Renewal Programme has since become authorised to offer immigration advice, in addition to the micro-grants it has administered in conjunction with Newham Council to provide direct payments to people who could demonstrate clearly that they had been financially affected by the pandemic and had no access to benefits. The Renewal Programme also manages two homeless hostels, offers an adult training education programme, peer support for adult carers. The discussion centred on the need for sustainable long-term solutions and appropriate continuous funding for the problems resulting from NRPF, where families have no safety net and struggle financially to feed their children rather than relying on the quick fixes which community groups provide in crisis. The Renewal Programme outlined its focus on giving

people the tools to enable them to live independently in the community, and noted that the relationship between the voluntary sector, faith sector, and local authorities has improved greatly.

The visit to Newham allowed Commissioners to see the vibrancy of community life and the resilience of families and households in the face of difficult challenges, many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In different guises, the role of local churches was evident in various ways, working with and supporting people of all faiths. It was particularly striking how many of the community projects put co-production at the heart of their work, ensuring that experts by experience could share their valuable insights to benefit others in similar situations. Reflecting on the visit, Bishop Paul, the Co-Chair of the Commission commented that 'our day in Newham was one filled with hope amidst the deep and varied challenges that families and households face. My abiding impression was of the deep value found in local people and locally-based projects offering the best support possible. The need for changes in national policies emerged throughout the day.' In her letter to Stephen Timms after the visit, thanking him and everyone we met for organising a 'truly wonderful visit and an exhilarating, informative and thoughtful day', the Chair of the Commission, Professor Janet Walker, wrote: 'Newham marked the beginning of the Commission's fieldwork and we could not have wished for more...There is clearly some interesting and dedicated work going on in Newham, and a number of initiatives within faith communities and in local organisations which are having considerable beneficial impact on the local community'. Revd Dr Julie Gittoes reflected afterwards about the 'importance of spaces outside of the home to connect households together in practical support and deepening relationships'.

A number of the projects in Newham will serve as case studies for the Commission as we seek to highlight examples of best practice and make recommendations to the Church and society. We are extremely grateful to everyone who welcomed us so warmly and shared their experiences, and to Stephen Timms for hosting the visit.

10 min read

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