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Let's get on

The Springfield Children's Centre case study



Introduction

to the Springfield Children's Centre case study



Authorship and acknowledgements

This case study of the Springfield Children's Centre has been written by Ben Cairns and Romayne Hutchison from the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR). It is based on interviews carried out with staff, parents and management committee members of the Springfield Project, of which the Springfield Children's Centre is an integral part, and with staff of Birmingham City Council.

IVAR would like to thank all the case study participants for giving their time and ideas so generously, and for the warm welcome we received at the Springfield Project.

This case study, carried out by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research during September 2008, describes the early stages in the life of the new Springfield Children's Centre, established through a partnership between Birmingham City Council and the Springfield Project. The Project is located in the Springfield area of Birmingham, a vibrant and diverse area about three miles south of Birmingham city centre. Springfield's population is largely Pakistani in heritage, but also includes people from a wide variety of cultural and faith backgrounds, including new immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa. The area is in the top 20% most deprived areas in Birmingham, with one of the city's highest infant mortality rates; employment rates are low and there are high levels of poverty.

The Springfield Project began its life nearly ten years ago under the auspices of St Christopher's Church, Springfield, when members of the church congregation recognised the need for a community focus. Research into the needs of local people was conducted and a community profile created, from which the Springfield Project was established. Since then the Project has worked with hundreds of local families, children and young people, providing services that include a nursery (known as Mini-Springers), 'Seedlings' (a parent and toddler group), family support and a youth group (SKATS - Springfield Kids are Total Stars).

During those ten years, faith-based organisations such as the Springfield Project have moved into the policy spotlight (Cairns et al., 2007, Farnell et al., 2003), being seen increasingly by policy makers as 'sources of values and commitment', with an important contribution to make to 'building a sense of local community and renewing civil society' (LGA, 2002, p.3). Christian churches, and inner city parishes in particular, including many in Birmingham, have developed community projects that aim to meet some of the social and welfare needs of people living in their localities. The Springfield Project, then, operates in a context in which faith-based organisations are recognised as part of a broad spectrum of voluntary and community sector provision of services to a variety of client groups.

In 2003 the Springfield Project was approached by Birmingham City Council (BCC) with a view to it entering into a partnership to develop a Children's Centre, part of the government's approach to enhancing the well-being of children and young people. While the style of individual Children's Centres may vary according to local need, all focus on the five outcomes identified by the Every Child Matters: Change for Children framework and the Children Act 2004: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; achieve economic well-being (Springfield Project website, 2008). All need to meet the 'core offer' of:

- Early education integrated with day care
- Family support and parental outreach
- Child and family health services
- Links with schools and Children's Information Services
- Links with Jobcentre Plus (Springfield Project website, 2008).

At the time of BCC's first approach in 2003, the timescale to complete the necessary building and other preparatory work proved to be too tight. In 2005, however, BCC again invited the Springfield Project to consider the development of a Children's Centre. Following a period of consultation within the Project, St Christopher's Church and the local community, a proposal was put to the Project Management Committee and St Christopher's Parochial Church Council for the development of a Children's Centre as part of the Springfield Project. The decision was then made to proceed with partnership arrangements with BCC to establish a purpose-built Children's Centre, supported by £2 million of sure start grant funding. While many church-based community projects provide services for children and young people, Springfield Children's Centre is so far unique amongst Birmingham's 67 Children's Centres in its location within a faith-based organisation closely linked to an Anglican church. The Children's Centre began providing services in March 2008, with its formal launch taking place on 15 November 2008.

Drawing on interviews and focus groups with key people directly involved with or connected to the Springfield Project, this case study tells the story of the decision to develop the Springfield Children's Centre and the way in which the Centre has already marked itself out as an example of effective practice in the delivery of Children's Centre services from a Christian base to a multi-racial and multi-faith community. It concludes by offering some reflections on what the findings may mean for others involved in the development of faith-based community services in collaboration with statutory agencies.

We present the findings from our interviews and focus groups anonymously; we describe ideas as being put forward either by 'case study participants' or, where there is a need to distinguish between them, by 'Springfield Project interviewees' (when referring to the views of Springfield Project staff or management committee members), by 'BCC staff', 'parents' or 'members of the congregation'. Key points are illustrated with unattributed quotations (indicated in italics) throughout.



Part one

The study findings

1 The decision to proceed with the development of Springfield Children's Centre - motivating factors

In this section we outline four main factors that motivated BCC staff and those involved with the Springfield Project to consider the development of a Children's Centre.

1.1 Birmingham City Council's need for a Children's Centre in the Springfield area

Staff of Birmingham City Council were, in line with government policy and the Every Child Matters agenda, charged with planning the development of Children's Centres across their vast local authority area. They were keen that many of these Centres should be run by voluntary and community organisations (VCOs). They needed to work towards the early establishment of Children's Centres in the most disadvantaged areas, of which the Springfield / Sparkhill area was one. It was important to be sure that any new Children's Centre could provide high quality services to children and families in an inclusive way, in line with the Children's Centre 'core offer'. There was also a need to ensure the existence of a good 'fit' between what any potential Children's Centre could offer and what the local authority required, and that the development phase could be carried out within quite a tight timescale. Exploratory discussions suggested that the Springfield Project offered an appropriate host for a Children's Centre.

1.2 The Springfield Project's commitment to meeting need in the community

Springfield Project interviewees and members of the congregation described how a commitment to meeting need in the community had been a force driving the early development of the Project; this remained a motivating factor behind the new initiative. Those involved with the Project had been, and continued to be, concerned to look at the community's needs rather than making assumptions about need: 'people in the church see massive need in the community; 'we could see the need - that was one of the big things'. Members of the congregation described their awareness of the isolation experienced by some local women at home after the birth of their first child, loneliness that was made more acute for those who spoke little English. This commitment was recognised by staff of BCC.

1.3 Continuing and extending the Springfield Project's high quality services

Springfield Project interviewees described how they and others had been concerned to continue, and if possible, extend, the work the Project was already doing with children, young people and families. The Project had, however, reached 'a number of key crossroads' and was beginning to struggle financially. Changes in the way in which VCOs are funded meant that the Project could not be certain of sufficient funding, nor of continuity of funding. They considered that they needed to work in partnership with the statutory sector in order not only to grow, but to survive: 'either we bought into this or we went back'; 'it would have been six years wasted not to go ahead'. Entering into a partnership with BCC to develop the Children's Centre offered the opportunity to develop and extend existing services to further benefit the local community: 'a really good thing for the church, the Project and the community'; 'everyone realises what a great offer was being made to us that could really make an impact on people's lives'.

For BCC, the fact that the Project was already providing a range of services, of high quality, to local children and their families, was an important factor in their approach: 'it was on their agenda; it was a natural extension of what they were doing'. The Project's long history of inter-faith working and understanding of the needs of a multi-faith community was seen as being of primary importance.

1.4 A commitment to expressing faith in a practical way

For the Springfield Project itself, and the clergy and congregation of St Christopher's Church with which the Project remains closely linked, there was a further crucial dimension to their motivation for developing a Children's Centre - the commitment to expressing Christian faith through practical action: 'we are not saying Christians are the only ones who love and serve, but we are open about it being our motivation'. This motivation shaped the Project's commitment to meeting need: 'everyone realised that our work as Christians has to be rooted in being here for people', and was at the heart of the decision to go forward in partnership with BCC in the Children's Centre initiative. 'A huge amount of prayer went in' to the thinking about the way ahead: 'we need to be really sure this is what God wants'. There was a strong desire to be 'practical as well as spiritual, expressing the love of God in practical as well as spiritual ways'. Springfield Project interviewees were clear, however, that evangelism was not part of their agenda for the Children's Centre; as one interviewee commented: 'the

church is on a journey - it recognises the breadth of God's mission in an area like this. Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, atheists co-exist happily in an area like this - groups come together well'.

2 The decision to proceed with the development of the Children's Centre - issues to be taken into account

As we have seen above, both BCC and those involved with the Springfield Project directly had strong motivations for the establishment of a Children's Centre as part of the Project. Both parties, however, wanted to be absolutely certain that this was the right course of action; we discuss below the four main factors that needed to be taken into account before a final decision to proceed could be reached.

2.1 The ability of the Springfield Project to meet the Children's Centre core offer

For Birmingham City Council, a primary concern with Springfield, as with all potential Children's Centres, was their ability to meet the Children's Centre core offer. In that sense, whether an organisation was faith-based or not was not of great significance; BCC interviewees were, however, concerned to ensure that any new Children's Centre would be fully inclusive in ethos and in practice. In this respect it was considered that the agendas of BCC and Springfield were at one: 'the whole idea of being inclusive was on their agenda'. Also important to BCC was the willingness of any potential Children's Centre to work in partnership; in this instance: 'they were very willing to work with us'.

2.2 The desire to maintain the Project's faith foundations

While being totally committed to inclusive provision of services, Springfield Project interviewees were also concerned to maintain the Project's Christian origins and ethos. Members of St Christopher's Church congregation noted that some other projects developed by churches had 'just become arms of social services - we wanted to keep faith at the centre of it'. Interviewees referred to the need to keep some degree of control while entering into partnership, to retain the distinctively Christian ethos that had acted



as a catalyst for the development of the Project and subsequently the Children's Centre: 'can we retain enough control? Can we be ourselves enough?' While the intention was not to evangelise to people of other faiths, they also wanted it known that 'we've always felt that our agenda is primarily as a church and we needed to be up-front - this is who we are'.

2.3 Securing the backing of the church congregation

Springfield Project interviewees and members of St Christopher's Church congregation stressed that they had needed to be sure that the whole congregation supported the initiative: 'so it isn't the special few who have the bee in their bonnet to do the community project'. It had therefore been important to take time over the decision, to think and to pray, and to be sure that worshippers understood that there would be, for example, major changes to the structure of the building (including demolition of the church hall) and financial implications. The time invested in thinking and praying about the decision had, it was felt, been very worthwhile: 'we carried the church with us because we had become a body of really committed people who were able to give themselves significantly to the community'; 'that time really paid off, so when the builders came back and started work people did not complain'.

2.4 The support of the local community

As a Christian church in an area with a majority Muslim population, Springfield Project interviewees considered that it had been vitally important before proceeding too far with the Children's Centre venture to ensure that the idea had the support of the local community. While questions were raised by a few people about the influx of money to an organisation with Christian roots, members of the nearby mosque expressed their support: 'here were Muslims supporting a church at cost because they believed in what we were doing'; 'we could not operate if the Muslim community did not want us to be here'. BCC staff again commented on the long history of inter-faith working and knowledge of the local community present in the Project and in St Christopher's Church as influencing their decision to enter into the partnership.

3 The partnership between the Springfield Project and Birmingham City Council

3.1 Characteristics of the partnership

Case study participants expressed uniformly positive views about the partnership between the Springfield Project and BCC, and about the relationships between staff of BCC and the Project's staff and management committee members. Springfield Project interviewees considered that the partnership was characterised by a high degree of trust; this was seen as a key ingredient of the relationship: 'it is essentially a relationship of trust, and really quite extraordinary in that'. They referred to the relationship as 'really a very positive and open one'. BCC staff shared Springfield Project interviewees' positive view of the way in which the partnership has developed to date.

Those involved in the detailed negotiations over buildings and finance felt that the discussions had been conducted in a very positive manner, characterised by trust, openness and generosity of spirit on both sides. The worries that some Springfield Project interviewees had had about being co-opted into a government agenda, or about their faith foundation being diluted, had not materialised; instead there had been 'incredible generosity towards the church and goodwill'.

3.2 Factors contributing to a positive partnership

Case study participants identified a number of factors that contributed to the positive nature of the partnership.

3.2.1 Shared vision and values

First, both parties - the Springfield Project and BCC - were very committed to the idea of a Children's Centre at Springfield; BCC were keen to see a Centre developed in the Sparkhill / Springfield area, and the Project wanted to continue and develop their existing services. There was thus a pragmatic element to the partnership in that both partners gained something from collaboration that neither could have achieved in isolation. Underpinning that was a shared vision: everyone involved in the negotiations was committed to the availability of high quality services for children and families. As one Springfield Project interviewee put it: 'I'm so impressed that their [Birmingham City Council] vision and values are so similar to ours in so many ways', while another commented that: 'within Birmingham City Council there is that drive for the best outcomes for children and families just like there is within the Project'.

3.2.2 Birmingham City Council's recognition of the Project's faith foundation

Second, it appears that the desire within the Springfield Project and St Christopher's church congregation to be open about their faith and their desire to maintain their Christian ethos was accepted by BCC. The partners' shared commitment to openness and flexibility made collaboration possible provided that the Children's Centre core offer could be met and that the Centre would operate in a completely inclusive way: 'we have never put them in a straitjacket; individual Children's Centres can still bring their own flavour to it'.

3.2.3 The importance of key individuals

Third, case study participants spoke of the important role played by certain key individuals, both in BCC - 'there have been some key champions of the initiative in the local authority' - and in the Springfield Project. The role played by one member of St Christopher's Church clergy was seen as crucial: 'he talks sense, and comes across very well to the local authority in bringing forward matters of faith and church while remaining both professional and credible'. The fact that some Springfield Project staff and management committee members had personal experience of working for a local authority, in some instances BCC itself, was seen as helpful: 'quite a few people know the system'; 'she knows the constraints we have to work in'.

4 Key stakeholders in the Children's Centre initiative

Case study participants described the involvement of a number of key stakeholders in the Springfield Children's Centre initiative - in particular the Woodlands Road Mosque, the Heart of Birmingham Teaching Primary Care Trust, Tearfund, the wider Church of England / Diocese of Birmingham infrastructure and the local community.

4.1 Woodlands Road Mosque

As we noted earlier, the support of the Woodlands Road Mosque was considered essential to the development of the Children's Centre and the way it was perceived in the predominantly Muslim local community: 'the mosque has been key in terms of stakeholder goodwill'. Members of the mosque had supported the proposal at the consultation stage, sometimes in the face of opposition from a small number of other local people, because they

felt that the Springfield Project provided a good service to the community and could continue to do so if planning permission were granted for the new building that would house the Children's Centre. Members of the mosque were quoted as saying: 'this is good, this is serving our families and we want this to go ahead': 'we want the church to deliver services in our community'.

The positive relationships built up over several years between the Woodlands Road Mosque, St Christopher's Church and the Springfield Project were seen as hugely influential in leading to a situation described by one interviewee thus: 'there is a real effort to live peaceably side by side and understand we're all part of the same community, and that our faith motivates us to deliver this service and their faith motivates them and we have this in common and it can unite'.

4.2 Heart of Birmingham Teaching Primary Care Trust

The role played by the Heart of Birmingham Teaching Primary Care Trust (tPCT) was seen as beneficial to the Project's development over several years and, most recently, to the growth of the Children's Centre. Springfield Project interviewees cited positive relationships with health professionals who work with local families as well as noting the tPCT's financial contribution to family support work: 'this has been a good and positive relationship that has enabled us to grow and not lurch from year to year'.

4.3 Tearfund

Springfield Project interviewees described the important contribution that Tearfund, the Christian agency working with a global network of churches to eradicate poverty, had made to the early stages of the Children's Centre initiative. It was felt that they had played a vital role in providing professional advice and consultancy to the Project and members of St Christopher's congregation and clergy when they were thinking through the issues involved in developing a Children's Centre. They had provided a consultant to run an Away Day looking at the realities of running a Children's Centre; this had been very much valued as a contribution to the decision-making process. One interviewee described Tearfund's value to the Project and St Christopher's as: 'a stakeholder that has good professional expertise, but also credibility for the church in terms of retaining the Christian heart'. Their financial support over several years was also recognised.

4.4 Church of England infrastructure

Springfield Project interviewees described the support they and St Christopher's clergy and congregation had received from the Church of England authorities in dealing with complicated building-related matters. Staff in the Diocese of Birmingham's Community Regeneration Department had been extremely helpful in facilitating links with other parts of the Church of England infrastructure and in helping staff of the Project to apply for Church Urban Fund money: 'we have had huge support from [staff member] and the diocese'.

4.5 The local community

Case study participants considered that the support of the local community had been an important factor in the development of the Children's Centre, particularly for an organisation with a Christian foundation operating in an area with a majority Muslim population. Young families had been very positive about the idea; older people too were pleased that there would be more local facilities for families. Springfield Project interviewees commented that: 'I'm overwhelmed by how positively it's been seen'; 'lots and lots of people have been really for this venture'. Parents using the Centre were pleased to have such a high quality and inclusive Centre within walking distance of their homes. The strong relationships already established between the Project, St Christopher's Church and the local community were seen as important contributory factors to the positive way in which the Centre was viewed.

5 The contribution of the Church Urban Fund

While the bulk of the funding for the establishment of Springfield Children's Centre was provided by Birmingham City Council, Springfield Project interviewees were also aware of the valuable contributions made by other funders at various stages of the Centre's development, in particular the Church Urban Fund (CUF), which had also supported the Project in the very early stages of its life. Having financial support from a Christian source was seen as important in its own right as a link with the Project's Christian roots: 'at various stages CUF has been really key to our development, with a key sense that actually what we're doing is linked into a church fund and a Christian vision'; 'something of a comfort and an affirmation for the church that this is not wholly a local authority, government thing'.

The CUF funding was seen as vital in financial terms in that it enabled the church to carry out some of the preparatory work associated with the development of a Children's Centre, including funding some of the legal costs. Having felt unable to proceed with the development of a Children's Centre when first approached in 2003, Springfield Project management committee and staff were aware that when Phase Two of Birmingham Children's Centres began, the timescale for development would be very tight, and therefore that it was essential to try to get some of the preparatory work done in advance: 'their [CUF] contribution was crucial; nobody else would give us that money; who else will give you money with no guarantee anything will come of it?'; 'The Church Urban Fund had quite a significant impact, probably more than it realises'.

6 The distinctive nature and contribution of Springfield Children's Centre

As we discussed earlier, Springfield Project interviewees had initially been concerned about how to maintain the Christian ethos and commitment that were behind the founding of the Springfield Project, and which continued to motivate many of those involved, while delivering a mainstream service in partnership with a large and secular statutory body to a multi-faith community. They also referred to a worry that the Centre might be seen as simply an extension of the church and not as a resource for the whole community. BCC staff, on their part, had wanted to be absolutely certain of the Centre's inclusive approach.

Discussions with Springfield Project's interviewees and with parents using the Centre suggest that the right balance has been struck: they described the Centre's characteristics in terms of the warmth of the welcome offered, its inclusive way of working and the variety of benefits that parents and children derive from their involvement. The Project's strong roots in the Christian faith were seen as contributing to this ethos.

6.1 The warmth of the Centre's welcome

Parents using the Centre clearly feel very positive about the services provided, and also about the Centre's ethos and the warmth of the welcome they receive. They described the friendliness combined with professionalism of staff and volunteers and the quality of the play equipment and other facilities: 'a wonderful service'; 'they genuinely care and love people; it's not about money'; 'the staff are so friendly you want to

come back'. The fact that the Centre is associated with the Christian church was described as either irrelevant or a positive attribute, for example helping Muslim women to feel more comfortable about their own faith than they might be in a secular organisation.

6.2 An inclusive way of working

Case study participants, whether Project staff and management committee, BCC staff, members of St Christopher's Church congregation or parents using the Centre, described the Springfield Children's Centre's very inclusive way of working. The fact that staff come from different faiths, reflective of the local community, and that the Centre promotes diversity through, for example, recognition of different religious festivals and provision of books and other materials in community languages, demonstrates that a foundation in one faith is not incompatible with a commitment to serving a diverse community. Parents commented positively that 'the Christian and non-Christian elements, including the space, the people, the facilities, are well blended together'. This blending was seen by case study participants as making Springfield Children's Centre a very special place to be.

6.3 Benefits for parents and children

Parents involved with the Centre described many benefits for themselves and their children. They greatly valued the fact that the Centre was within walking distance of their homes; this was seen as very important, since taking children on buses was often considered difficult, and most women did not drive. They liked the range of activities on offer, the quality of the play equipment and the teaching and the multitude of services in the one building. They commented favourably on the fact that the size of the Centre allows many children to be accommodated. The opportunity to take part in pre-school activities was seen as good preparation for school; meeting others from different faiths was also seen as a valuable experience. Children were described as having learned new skills through inter-acting with others and having the chance to play with new toys and take part in activities they would not have done at home.

For the parents themselves, the Centre also provided fresh opportunities, to be able to return to study while knowing their children were cared for, to benefit from courses on aspects of parenting, and to make new friends. Parents commented favourably on the fact that the Centre offers nursery provision that was much needed in the area: 'it is good that the church is offering so much to the community'.

6.4 Factors contributing to the Centre's distinctive ethos

Case study participants suggested a number of factors that contribute to the Centre's distinctive ethos. The tone set by paid staff, of all faiths, was seen as important: 'a very important thing has been the combination of professionalism and the very genuine expression of faith of the employed people here'. Staff, volunteers and management committee take time to reflect on their ways of working; for those who are Christian: 'we think together about how Christian values translate into our actions and behaviours with colleagues, parents and children. We think about how these values are embedded in other faiths too'.

Springfield Project interviewees described the ongoing close connections with St Christopher's Church: most of the management committee are members of St Christopher's congregation; many worshippers act as volunteers in the Project, particularly with Seedlings, the Project's parent and toddler group. Furthermore Seedlings takes place in the church itself rather than in the physically linked new building: 'having Seedlings in the church has been really important and a real benefit'. The church makes strong efforts through its worship to link the spiritual life of St Christopher's congregation with the practical expression of faith in the community: 'you can't maintain distinctiveness if you don't maintain prayer and worship. It's an issue of spirituality; we can't do this unless spirituality is maintained and nourished'.

These factors were felt to help sustain the Centre's Christian faith foundations, and its distinctive ethos, while working in an inclusive way in a multi-faith community.

7 Critical success factors in the development of Springfield Children's Centre

We highlighted earlier the factors that case study participants considered contributed to a successful partnership between the Springfield Project and Birmingham City Council. In this section we describe the issues that they felt have contributed to the successful development and early life of the Children's Centre more broadly.

The ideas put forward by case study participants fall under four main headings:

- A vision for the future of the Centre
- Access to a variety of expertise

- Engagement with the community and wider networks

- Openness about the initiative's faith foundations.

7.1 A vision for the future of the Centre

Springfield Project interviewees stressed the importance of the 'bigger picture'. While practical issues such as the design of the building needed close attention, it was also important to be able to see beyond them to the purpose of the whole venture: 'what's helped us is that we've not seen the building as the end point'; 'it's important to recognise that everyone involved wants the best for children'. This, it was suggested, helped all those involved to clarify the purpose of the partnership between BCC and the Springfield Project and to deal with any difficulties along the way: 'we have to be confident enough about what we offer to go the extra mile to make it happen; if we'd just run after the money there were too many hurdles to get through'. Maintaining a vision of the desired outcomes was seen as essential in the process of managing change, for congregation and existing Project staff.

7.2 Access to a variety of expertise

As we described earlier, Springfield Project interviewees stressed the importance of having the backing of the whole church congregation before embarking on a major venture that would have a significant impact on them. Some members of St Christopher's congregation had also offered their professional expertise, for example in relation to financial matters or negotiating contracts. One Springfield interviewee summed up the balance of skills needed by commenting: 'you have to have a balance of people who look to the sky - the visionaries - and also people with their feet on the ground'.

The Project had also drawn on external expertise in the form of legal advice, support from the Diocesan infrastructure and other parishes with experience of developing Children's Centres: 'to be able to say there's a Children's Centre in Stoke and an Elim Centre that's done it; all the visiting we did was incredibly helpful'.

7.3 Engaging with the community and wider networks

Case study participants considered that the support of the local community had been vital to the developmental stage of Springfield Children's Centre. Springfield Project interviewees suggested that: 'you can't just put a big building there; you have to build relationships', while BCC staff described how the good

Part two

Concluding reflections

relationships built up over several years between the Project, St Christopher's Church and the local community had influenced their decision to pursue the idea of partnership: 'they are embedded in their area'.

7.4 Openness about the initiative's faith foundations

As we have described throughout this case study, all those involved with the development of Springfield Children's Centre have been totally committed to the idea of providing an inclusive service to the multi-racial and multi-faith community in which they are based, and with which they have such close links. But at no time have the key individuals from the church or Project wanted to play down or dilute the fact that their motivation for the development of the Project and ultimately the Centre lay in their Christian faith. They considered that this openness was important in order to reassure people that there was no 'hidden agenda' to their work, and because it helped others - often from other faiths - to be more open about themselves and their beliefs too. One Springfield Project interviewee summed up the importance of their faith foundation, and of being open about it, thus:

'People come to us because they know we are who we say we are and we're nothing threatening or dangerous that they need to be wary of. They don't feel at risk of being subjected to anything. We are very positive and quietly confident about who we are and it seems to rub off; others are who they are'.

The positive opinions expressed by parents using the Children's Centre echo this point of view.



8 ■ The importance of a shared vision and goals

This case study demonstrates the valuable contribution that faith-based organisations can make to the provision of community-based services where they and their statutory partners share the vision of high quality local services, and are willing to trust each other and work together towards that goal. The partnership between the Springfield Project and Birmingham City Council appears to work well because of these shared goals, trust amongst key individuals, careful thought and preparation. The commitment of both parties to working in an inclusive way has been crucial. The willingness of BCC staff to accept the Springfield Project's strong foundation in the Christian faith has been vital; without that willingness, partnership might not have been achieved. Both parties have been able to gain from the partnership, to the ultimate benefit of local families and children.

What, then, does this experience have to offer to others considering taking a similar journey?

9 ■ Lessons for other initiatives

The Springfield Project's experience highlights the need for vision and clarity of purpose, for trust and the ability to draw on a wide variety of resources and sources of support. Its deep roots in the Christian faith and also in the wider, multi-faith, local community, have enabled it to straddle the boundaries of different faiths, to feel confident to negotiate on its own terms without compromising its identity and ultimately to work in partnership with a secular statutory agency. Any other faith-based organisation wishing to tread a similar path would need to be sure of the strength of their vision and the breadth of their networks of support. In the absence of a clear vision for the future of their organisation and its place in the community, smaller organisations in **particular risk** being co-opted to meet the agendas of statutory agencies and losing their own distinctive features.

As Springfield Project interviewees noted, they were able to draw on the skills of members of St Christopher's Church congregation and also on the resources of the wider Church of England infrastructure. Many inner city parishes have much smaller congregations than St Christopher's, and

fewer people with the professional skills that are needed in a venture such as the development of a Children's Centre. As we have noted elsewhere (ACVAR, 2004), the focus of the Church as an institution is changing, with more churches developing community projects which provide services not only to their own worshippers but to other local people. This places demands on members of church congregations in terms of the organisation and management of projects; it also potentially changes the role of clergy if the church is to take on direct responsibility for oversight and management of community projects. In areas such as Springfield, an understanding of multi-faith working will also be a crucial ingredient in the development of any such project.

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