



Telling our story

A conversation about *What Matters? Who Cares?*

Ilminster, Monday 5 March, 2018

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Introduction

When we gather in community, we share our stories. We come with our own sense of self, the circumstances that have shaped us on that day, the history that forms us. By gathering, intentionally, we commit to encountering the stories of others, to knowing ourselves more fully in their company and sharing in a corporate discernment of our purposes, our hopes, our destiny. It is through such gathering that we are made as community, that we grow together towards the future that is always glimpsed, always unfolding.

That is what happened when we gathered in Ilminster for *What Matters? Who Cares?* in early March. Our collective was drawn from our local communities: Chard and Ilminster, and outlying villages. There were around 100 of us, living our commitment to hearing each other's stories, to listening attentively and sharing understanding in the hope of discerning what matters in the places we live, and who cares enough to do something about it.

So we heard from local people working in health and social care, farming, business and industry, government, schools, and churches. Then we gathered in sub-groups to begin shaping a response, to identify priorities and cast visions for what is to be done. This is a digest of what we heard, of what we said, and of what we discerned together about the future of our communities.

Note: speakers' contributions are not recorded verbatim. Here is a narrative retelling of the event, true to its essence, if not its detail.

Health and social care

Presentation by Jane Dewick, Training Manager, Department of Work and Pensions

There has been a major change in the way benefits are paid to citizens over recent years. This takes the form of Universal Credit, which has replaced six benefits (Job Seekers' Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Working Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, and Housing Benefit).

The idea is to simplify payment processes and empower recipients to have a greater role in managing their money. But the change has been dramatic. For example, Housing Benefit is now paid monthly in arrears, directly to the citizen. They pay their own rent, but it doesn't always work out well for vulnerable people who have never taken such responsibility before, who are unaccustomed to budgeting.

Of course, Universal Credit has streamlined cost for the government. There is less benefit fraud thanks to cooperation between the Department for Work and Pensions and HMRC – meaning earners receive a top-up to their taxable income depending on need, rather than the same rate of benefit every month. And the move to digitisation has reduced the need for face-to-face contact, meaning fewer staff are needed to implement payments.

But this can come at a social cost: what of the 9pc of the population who lack the skills to engage with the government online, or who simply don't have access to the internet? We need to help these people, not just so they can access what is due to them, but to overcome feelings of isolation and despair, to show them compassion and understanding.

That is our challenge. So how will we respond?

Our response

Transport: Let's expand transport services to help vulnerable people stay connected, working across borders to ensure seamless travel in the region. Then let's publicise what's available, so it's used by as many people as possible.

Respite care: Let's establish networks that provide respite for carers, even if only for a couple of hours at a time. They need space to be themselves, to breathe and relax. Their job is hard; it takes its toll.

Information: Let's set up a one-stop shop for information about care, benefits, and opportunities to socialise, as well as equipping people with digital skills. These could be held in libraries or church and village halls – places of meeting and welcome in which people can gather and feel connected. We also need to network with Village Agents, who provide a valuable resource in local communities.

Hubs, and inter-generational mixing: Let's establish and promote schemes that encourage different generations to mix, to enhance mutual understanding and support. We believe all schools should be linked with elderly communities, perhaps local nursing or care homes. And we could use community cafes or pubs, or village halls, as places for people of all ages to meet and learn from each other.

Farming

Presentation by Mark Humphries, a local farmer

Many farms are being sold, including a major sell-off of Duchy of Cornwall land around our local villages. Part of the problem is that small-scale farms are less financially viable than larger-scale enterprises.

But the big problem is inspiring the next generation, and providing opportunities for them. Many young people are precluded from entering farming, even if they'd like to, because of the capital required to start up. There is no mechanism to help them. Some head straight to places like New Zealand, a land of opportunity.

Of course, Brexit brings a huge amount of uncertainty. We know the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is to be phased out, with current subsidy payments only assured until 2022. What happens next? And how will farm businesses that depend on subsidies to make ends meet balance their books? The average farmer receives just 9pc of income through food sales, and the rest comes from subsidies. That's less than a quarter of what it was 40 years ago.

Another risk factor around Brexit is availability of labour, since many farms depend on EU migrant workers.

Then there is the issue of TB and badgers. Despite the cull, TB continues to be a challenge. If it's detected on a farm, livestock movements are restricted for a minimum of five months; but it can take years. There's a financial cost, of course, but there's also an emotional toll. This is our life. It means the world to us.

So the question is: do people really understand what happens on their local farms? And can the community help open the door, providing support and increasing knowledge?

Our response

Food: Let's show how much we value local food. Let's find opportunities not just to buy locally ourselves, rather than relying on the profit-hungry supermarkets, but to help our friends and neighbours do likewise. This will enhance connections between farmers and their local communities.

Careers: Let's find ways of spreading the good news about careers in farming among local young people. Let's establish hubs to share information, and provide opportunities for networking and training.

Brexit: Let's listen attentively to what farmers want from Brexit. Then let's help them articulate it, advocate for them, and strive for it.

Wellbeing: Let's become a community of pastoral care for our local farmers. Let's help them through tough times like a positive TB test. Let's provide social events where we come together and celebrate all that they do for us, and for our nation. Let's show friendly support and understanding, as well as taking practical steps to improve their lot.

Business and industry

Presentation by Stuart Cochrane, Manufacturing Manager, Numatic International

There are profound opportunities for local businesses and communities to help each other. We are mutually dependent, and need to recognise the role each plays in the other's wellbeing.

For example, Numatic employs 850 people from the local area. That means the business is responsible for helping them pay their mortgages, meet the cost of childcare, plan for a secure retirement and enjoy a fulfilling working life.

That's a big responsibility, and the local community can help a business like Numatic discharge it. For example, when making purchasing decisions, think about where products are manufactured. Buy locally if you can. And always try to buy British. Localism is an important part of community flourishing.

So is equipping citizens with a well-calibrated moral compass and a strong work ethic. Again, employers like Numatic play a crucial role here, but we all have a share in this. Parents and carers, community leaders and youth workers, should be good role models. That will develop the skills and habits of the workforce, so virtue develops over time. It's a long process. But it's absolutely worth the effort.

Wouldn't you agree?

Our response

Coordination and networking: Let's ensure local businesses work together to provide training and development, especially in relation to soft skills.

Education: Let's promote opportunities to connect education providers with the business community, so that they work in tandem to develop the skills of local people.

Recruitment and training: Let's play a part in publicising recruitment opportunities, perhaps even organising a recruitment fair. That will help employers connect with local people, finding the right talent for their needs.

Local government

Presentation by Val Keitch, Mayor of Ilminster

The biggest challenge facing local government won't surprise you: it is falling budgets. And it's having an impact on our capacity to meet the needs of residents.

Councillors care deeply about the people they represent. You wouldn't do the job if you felt otherwise. So it's hard to see essential services being impaired or diminished through lack of funding.

Thank goodness for the work of volunteer groups, who take up some of the slack. Even so, it's getting more difficult to provide for local needs.

Planning is another challenge. Decisions need to be taken locally, but there are some calls for central government to take the power away from councils. That's very worrying.

Tied up with this issue is affordable housing. We don't want our young families to have to move to own their own property. And we want to retain the essential character of our towns and villages.

We need to provide services in a different way, working in concert with local communities and growing partnerships. This the challenge: how do we work together for the flourishing of our communities?

Our response

Communication: Let's find new ways to keep local people informed about what's going on in relation to planning and service provision. And let's remember those people who aren't digitally connected, by issuing physical newsletters that keep them in the loop. We could also use pubs and schools as hubs for digital engagement.

Volunteering: Let's build associative communities to support service provision, drawing on existing networks such as churches and member organisations. Let's encourage appropriate candidates to stand for parish councils, so we can strengthen local government as its grassroots. And let's reach out especially to young people, so they realise they have a stake in our common life, and a seat at the table.

Employment: Let's work with local employers and education providers to develop apprenticeship programmes that enhance the prospects of young people in our communities.

Housing: Let's be open-minded about planning applications in our communities, and model such an attitude for our neighbours. We need to find ways of helping young families stay in our towns and villages, and supporting our elderly. In this way, we can honour our past and remember our future.

Schools

Presentation by Greg Hoare, Chair of Governors, Combe St Nicholas C of E School

Politics and money are inextricably linked to schools and education. Our budgets depend on pupil numbers, and this is often out of our hands. For example, if house prices are high, the number of young families in a town or village will diminish. How do we cope in small village schools when numbers are down?

It's not just subjects like Maths and English that are important to our pupils' education. We're equipping them with valuable life skills. Our task is to help them realise their potential. But it takes time, and commitment, and money.

The staff at our schools deserve praise and thanksgiving. They work hard, showing huge commitment.

If you work in a school, you soon realise that poverty is real. It's on our doorstep. Some pupils don't eat a proper meal unless it's supplied at school. School staff identify those most in need of help, often before anyone else.

Academisation isn't far off. Lots of schools are looking over their shoulders, and wondering what the future holds.

The question is: who cares? And what difference can we make?

Our response

Shaping policy: Let's make sure we, local communities, contribute to consultations about the future of education, ensuring that the flourishing of our young people is made central to all policy developments.

Building community: Let's play our part in supporting teachers, parents and carers and social services to equip young people with virtuous dispositions. Let's involve organisations such as the Rotary Club, local churches or the diocese of Bath and Wells, as well as individual mentors and role-models, who can have a part in developing pupils' life skills.

Expanding vision: Let's work with local employers and professionals to show young people the wealth of opportunities available to them, right on the doorstep.

A Commitment Charter: Let's establish a formal charter that communities can sign up to, enshrining our commitment to local schools, and the flourishing of young people. Let's be the change we long to see.

Church communities

Presentation by Peter Saunders, Churchwarden, St Stephen's Church, Winsham

We open our church every day for people who want to use it. It's a powerful witness, and it's much appreciated by the local community.

It is not cheap or easy to run a church. They're often old buildings, needing a huge amount of maintenance. For example, we have a quinquennial inspection that reveals the state of our fabric. And we usually rely on grants to fund what needs doing.

The real church is the people. Not everyone on our electoral rolls attends regularly. Those who do represent an aging population. Sometimes, we wonder where the next generation is.

We need to stay focused on the local community. We visit schools, and initiatives like 'Open the Book' [where church volunteers share Bible stories with local school pupils] help maintain a connection with young people. We're sowing seeds.

Friends groups are gaining popularity. They buttress the church, even though many members don't view themselves as churchgoers. The local church is important to people. It's written into the fabric of their lives.

So, the question is simple: how do we build on our connections to our local communities, serving them and working towards mutual flourishing?

Our response

Finding friends: Let's establish templates for Friends groups, drawing on good practice from neighbouring dioceses like Exeter, in order to build links with local communities and secure financial stability for our churches.

The lost generation: Let's look into holding services outside of church buildings, in village halls and community centres, where we can be more informal. Let's draw on the experiences of other churches, both within and beyond the Anglican tradition. And let's maintain our commitment to initiatives like Messy Church and Open the Book. We need to bridge the gap between those who attend regularly, and those who don't.

Open doors: Let's try to keep as many of our parish churches open around the clock, so people can come and go as they please for prayer or quiet time. Let's consider using the spaces in other ways – as Post Offices, say, or community shops.

Facing hard questions: Let's face the hard questions about church buildings. If they need to close, let's be honest about the reasons. If they need reordering to make them fit for purpose, let's make it as straightforward as possible. And let's deal with money matters head-on, trying to keep local financial commitments to the diocese as low as we can.

Concluding remarks

Drawing on the summing-up by Bishop Ruth, Bishop of Taunton

By gathering, we grasp the importance of listening to each other, to the stories we tell in our communities. The church is a part of this: to live authentically, we need to be present to local communities, to learn from them and find ways of helping them to flourish.

The major challenge facing the church is attendance. The population in our diocese is one million, of which 23,000 attend church regularly. Clearly, something needs to change. We need to work with communities, opening our doors, broadening the use of our buildings where appropriate, overcoming loneliness and isolation in our communities, and fostering deeper relationships with our neighbours.

When we gather again in May, during the Bishop's Mission, we'll continue sharing stories, finding moments of connection between the church and local communities. That way, we'll grow together to become healing, loving and caring communities of worth, learning about and from each other, and further establishing our commitment to mutual wellbeing.

This is what it means to live and tell our story. It's a shared story about what matters in our communities. And because we all care about what happens where we live, we'll work together to find new ways of being and doing that bring flourishing, and hope, and joy.

TO JOIN IN THE CONVERSATION AND ATTEND OUR EVENTS IN THE TELLING OUR STORY WEEK,

MAY 14-20, SIMPLY VISIT WWW.TELLINGOURSTORY.CO.UK