

Grassroots

...a different point of view



Strategic Overview
2018 - 2021



GRASSROOTS is an ecumenical Christian programme of community engagement. In dialogue with the churches and other faith communities, GRASSROOTS strives to uncover Christ's presence in a sharp edge of engagement with contemporary issues of community relations, peace & reconciliation, and injustice & inequality in Luton's diverse context. This vision is strengthened by working with and through our partner agencies – Near Neighbours, Churches Together in Luton, the Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches, Luton Council of Faiths, Luton Fairtrade Steering Group and Ghar se Ghar (Hindi/Urdu words for 'Home to Home' - a Women's Co-operative).



The work of GRASSROOTS is delivered under four key themes which all include a variety of different events and programmes, many of which are related to and influenced by more than one theme of work:

<p>Community Cohesion & Inter Faith Relations</p> <p><i>which began the work of and partnership with Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF)</i></p>	<p>Spirituality of Justice</p> <p><i>which gave birth to the 'Making Luton a Fairtrade Town' Campaign</i></p>	<p>Working with Women across Faiths & Cultures</p> <p><i>in partnership with Ghar se Ghar (meaning 'Home to Home' in Hindi/Urdu)</i></p>	<p>Church Related Community Work</p> <p><i>in partnership with Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches (BPBHCC)</i></p>
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GRASSROOTS seeks to engage in God's mission by discerning the Spirit and living the Word of God in the plural world of today. Motivated and nourished by the spirit of justice and peace, GRASSROOTS works alongside communities and individuals of all faiths and backgrounds.

OUR VISION

- To work for the common good and promote human flourishing
- To build renewed trust in place of broken relationships
- To foster the development of new skills by providing opportunities for learning and encounter
- To enable all to explore and express their spirituality and values with confidence
- To deliver our work creativity through innovative and engaging events and programmes
- To meet the needs of a changing societal context locally and nationally

OUR OBJECTIVES

- To accompany and partner with the Churches in God's mission
- To work for strengthening relations amongst different faiths
- To empower communities to articulate their own needs and solutions
- To serve the community through supporting cultural and faith related community initiatives
- To advance educational development by enhancing the capacity and ability of young people
- To be a hub of knowledge exchange and resource which develops societal civility

OUR VALUES



Due to the complexity and sensitive nature of the work we engage in, which is motivated and inspired by the vision and objectives we strive towards, we adopt and abide by six key values which remain a core part of our ethos:

Vision
that is global and inclusive - bringing new insights and perspectives

Hope
that transformation is possible and that good will overcome the evils of the world

Faith
that the spirit is at work transforming the world and our community

Freedom
for individuals, families and communities to develop their full potential

Solidarity
in our commitment to share in the struggle for justice

Respect
for every person, and their ability to give and receive

In response to the changing needs, challenges and opportunities at both a local and national level, the complex nature of working within the third sector, and the increased difficulties of securing sustainable and sufficient funding at a time of austerity, GRASSROOTS has identified four strategic themes which it shall focus on within its key areas of work between 2018 – 2021:

Supporting Ecumenism and Interfaith Engagement within the Church

We wish to advance our work with the Church by hosting visits of ordained and lay people, sharing our experience and best practice through giving talks, delivering bespoke training sessions, facilitating interfaith encounters and developing a published educational resource.

Enhancing Regional Support, Influence and Resources

We wish to develop the 'GRASSROOTS Hub', a network which will enable organisations to connect with us, exchange best practice, share knowledge, engage in collaborative activities, identify sources of current research and influence policy at a local and national level.

Developing Interfaith and Intercultural Competency

We wish to utilise the unique experience, skills and capabilities within the GRASSROOTS team and our wider network to develop bespoke training programmes, consultancy services and engagement opportunities including interfaith tours, visits and other encounters.

Reaching People Living on the Fringe of Society

We wish to expand our engagement with those 'living on the fringe' of society, including those who may be from minority communities or members of groups traditionally harder to reach, by further developing innovative and effective projects and partnerships.

ABOUT GRASSROOTS

Work in the voluntary sector has traditionally meant people working together for the common good, but in recent years, institutionalism and professionalism have increasingly influenced the sector. GRASSROOTS has made a conscious choice to be different. We choose to be *a presence and a companion*, remaining *organic and emergent* rather than operating just like a business. We seek to be a wrestling entity, affirming the importance of being on the margins, even whilst engaging with and influencing the mainstream. We are committed to 'being on the journey' and remaining open to God's unexpected ways of reaching us.

THE CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH GRASSROOTS OPERATES

Luton is located approximately 30 miles north of Central London. The town has excellent communication links, with good train and motorway access and its own international airport running flights within Europe. With an estimated 203,201⁽¹⁾ residents, Luton has the second largest population of the East of England Local Authorities and is the most densely populated. The town has a comparatively young population as 28% of residents are aged 19 and under, the highest proportion in the East of England. Only 12% of residents are aged 65 and over, the smallest proportion in the region.

Deprivation

Luton is currently ranked as the 59th most deprived Local Authority in England⁽²⁾ out of 326. In 2007, Luton was ranked as the 87th most deprived Local Authority, and in 2010 it was 69th, showing that Luton is becoming relatively more deprived in comparison to the other Local Authorities in England. Luton has nine neighbourhoods ranking in the top 10% most deprived areas in the country. Of these, three are in Northwell, two are in Farley and South wards, and one is in the Biscot and Dallow wards.

Employment

There are 80,100 jobs in Luton⁽³⁾ with major employers including Luton Borough Council, Luton & Dunstable NHS, Luton Airport, TUI UK Ltd, Monarch Airlines, General Motors, Bedfordshire Police and the University of Bedfordshire. The average annual full time salary of people living in Luton is £24,873 per annum, which is less than the national average of £26,244⁽⁴⁾. The unemployment rate in Luton of 5.45% (Luton South) and 4.5% (Luton North) is higher than the national average of around 2.59%⁽⁵⁾.

Diversity

The town is ethnically diverse, with over a third of the population being of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) origin⁽¹⁾, with significant South Asian and African Caribbean communities. A recent Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) showed that 51% of children (aged 0-15) are of BME origin⁽⁶⁾. In recent years, the diversity of the town has significantly increased with the arrival of Eastern European immigrants, and communities of Turks, Congolese, Nigerians, Somalians, Ghanaians and Zimbabweans⁽⁷⁾

CHALLENGES

The Luton context, as described above, has given rise to very specific challenges in the town. In the past a local group of Muslim fanatics had attracted attention far out of proportion to their minimal numbers, and their activities were the progenitor of the English Defence League (EDL). In turn, the EDL had successfully provoked anger amongst Muslims and great unrest amongst Christians, other faith communities and people of no particular faith. In recent years, Britain First have visited Luton on a number of occasions, provoking the local Muslim community and falsely claiming to do so in the name of Christianity. This creates fear, division and misunderstanding, which GRASSROOTS has for many years, been able to counteract in it's outreach, mediation and engagement across the town.

(1) 2011 Census: Population and Household Estimates for England and Wales (Data Published 16th July 2012)

(2) 2015 Indices of Multiple Deprivation: Luton (November 2015)

(3) Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) (2011)

(4) Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings: Luton (January 2012)

(5) BBC Employment Tracker (Based on Office for National Statistics Data) (12th September 2012)

(6) Bedfordshire and Luton Strategic Housing Market Assessment (March 2010)

(7) The growth and changing complexion of Luton's population (January 2011)

THE ROLE OF GRASSROOTS

As we have seen, Luton is ethnically diverse with challenges of deprivation, low household income and growing levels of immigration. Anxiety and concern within the diverse communities of the town have been fuelled by the recent history of antagonism by Muslim extremists and Far Right groups, the anti-immigrant rhetoric and outfall of the EU Referendum Campaign, and an increase in Hate Crime following terror attacks in London and Manchester.

All of these things indicate the great need for a programme like GRASSROOTS in Luton, which has been delivering a wide range of programmes, enabling individuals and groups in Luton to know one another, break down barriers, and develop friendships and partnerships with those from different cultural/faith backgrounds, for more than 25 years. It takes years to build community resilience, which proves successful in challenging circumstances, and GRASSROOTS has the understanding, experience and capacity of 'acting while reflecting' within a very diverse and complex context, being adaptable, receptive and relational in order to be effective and authentic on the ground.



Whilst the media continue to portray Luton as 'a hotbed of terrorism', the town has maintained its calm, peace and composure. Even the violent protests of August 2011, whilst certainly presenting a challenge, did not affect Luton on a long term basis as community mediation has worked successfully and has been effective to combat challenges and resist provocation on all sides. Of course, we would not wish to claim all the credit for these successes, one cannot ignore the role that GRASSROOTS has played - both reactively and pro-actively, over many years – in creating a culture of dialogue and cooperation for peace across diverse religions and beliefs. We have been supporting Luton to become a mutually nourishing and harmonious community, appreciating its diversity, with all the complexity this raises. If Luton had experienced inter-communal riots, programmes like GRASSROOTS would no doubt be inundated with funding to do our work. Instead, the existence of GRASSROOTS has always been precarious as we struggle to secure the core funding needed to enable our work.



The 'Big Society' agenda of the early 21st century demanded 'more for less', and whilst this agenda has now declined and fallen by the wayside, GRASSROOTS has continued to deliver this as it has for many years. We will continue to do so, inspired by our faith in God's abundant love for the world. That said, we seek to make our financial situation more secure in order that the work of GRASSROOTS can continue to grow and flourish.

WHY IS GRASSROOTS UNIQUELY PLACED TO ENGAGE IN ITS WORK?

REPUTATION



Since its formation in 1991, GRASSROOTS has built a solid reputation as an organisation which can be relied upon to engage with, and respond to, the various issues which pose a threat to community cohesion and inter faith relationships in Luton's widely diverse context. Our commitment to on-the-ground presence and building of relationships with key leaders and members of Luton's cultural and religious communities has resulted in a high level of public trust, extending beyond the locale. GRASSROOTS maintains a global perspective, deliberately engaging with communities who hail from all around the world, enabling sensitivity to the political and social situations overseas that can have a huge impact on Luton's peoples and the town's inter-communal relationships, regardless of faith or cultural background.

EXPERIENCE



With our proven track record in building community cohesion and enabling interfaith and intercultural dialogue, GRASSROOTS is uniquely positioned to respond to the threats and challenges posed by extremist groups, whether religious or political, Far Right or in the name of Islam. While possessing a combined wealth of experience, we do not claim to hold the solutions to the issues affecting Luton's diverse population. Instead, we work to empower Luton's faith and cultural communities to articulate and implement their own positive responses to emerging situations in the town, and to engage with the contributions made by others. GRASSROOTS seeks to recognise, encourage, share and cascade examples of goodwill and good practice within and between Luton's communities.

DELIVERY



The work of GRASSROOTS and our methods of engagement remain crucial in the current economic climate, as stereotyping and the scapegoating of migrants and those who are perceived as the 'other' always increase in economically constrained times. However, with these considerations in mind, GRASSROOTS also recognises the importance of being attentive to the anxieties and concerns felt by many people as a result of the rapid changes in the make-up of the local population.

FAITH



Our link to the churches is a key strategic partnership which has helped amplify the voice of the Church in the public square. This partnership is a core component of the social witness of Luton churches in advocating for social justice and reconciled relationships with God, neighbour and the whole of creation as the basis for a flourishing society in the midst of economic and political uncertainty. The lead role that GRASSROOTS plays in interfaith dialogue and engagement provides a trustworthy platform on which to build and expand the conversation on the distinct contribution of faith and spiritual capital to building community resilience in Luton and beyond.

GROWTH



As the environment that GRASSROOTS operates in is ever-changing, we endeavour to remain organic, fluid and responsive, so that we are able to grow and develop as new challenges arise. As a result, this Strategic Overview document intentionally remains a 'work in progress', to allow us the flexibility we need to adapt to the demands placed upon us, to meet the societal challenges at a local, national and international level, and to navigate the challenging funding requirements we face. It is not intended to suit the requirements of every funder or supporter, particularly across the divide of secular and sacred, but rather to act as a base from which to meet particular needs as they may arise.

“WHAT PEOPLE SAY ABOUT US”

“GRASSROOTS is the kind of organisation, nay - a movement, which has the right approach to many of the challenges that we face in our contemporary society. In many ways its thinking and philosophy is ahead of its time. I hope it will have the freedom and support to further the already positive work of the organisation. May the Almighty continue to guide it in its endeavours, Amen!”



“I have always admired the work of GRASSROOTS. During these dark days of ethnic and religious tension, the work you and your dedicated staff do shines the light of hope. You are able to combine the quick response to events and the slow work of building relationships across the faith and cultural divisions. May God continue to bless [the work of] GRASSROOTS.”

“GRASSROOTS has made an enormous difference to Luton. The town could have developed very differently over the years if it were not for the calming yet energising input coming from GRASSROOTS and its various associates. The GRASSROOTS model seems absolutely ideal [in seeking to] inspire other, younger, women and men, to see the point of working through interfaith models.”



“Thank you for bringing the faith leaders to our school. It was so lovely to have so many adults, all of different religions, in one place to share their views and talk to the children about tolerance, understanding and differences. The children truly benefited from it and it gave a very strong and consistent message about working together for the benefit of the town where they live.”

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