



# **Looking Back & Moving Forward**

***Developing Vision and Strategy***

**2012-2015**

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## Who we are

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

## Our Vision

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, alongside communities and individuals of all faiths and backgrounds, is

- working for common good and human flourishing
- building renewed trust in place of broken relationships
- fostering the development of new skills by providing resources for learning
- enabling all to explore and express their spirituality and values with confidence and creativity

## Our Objectives

- To accompany the Churches in their mission and ministry
- To work for strengthening relations amongst different faiths
- To empower communities to articulate their own needs and solutions
- To serve the community through supporting community initiatives & advancing educational development
- To engage with the building of a civil society in Luton and its vicinity

## Values

### Vision

that is global and inclusive  
- bringing new insights and perspectives

### Hope

that the forces of good can triumph over the forces of evil

### Faith

that the Spirit is at work transforming the world

### Respect

for every person, and their ability to give and receive

### Freedom

for individuals & communities to develop their full potential

### Solidarity

in our commitment to share in the struggle for justice

## Current Work & Priorities

Community Cohesion & Inter Faith Relations (Gave birth to Luton Council of Faiths)  
Spirituality of Justice (Gave birth to "Making Luton a Fairtrade Town" Campaign)  
Working with Women across Faiths & Cultures (In partnership with Ghar se Ghar [Hindi/Urdu words meaning Home to Home])  
Church Related Community Work (In partnership with Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches)

## **An introduction to GRASSROOTS**

Voluntary sector work has traditionally meant people working together for the common good. In recent years, however, institutionalism and professionalism have increasingly crept in. 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 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', remaining open to God's unexpected ways of reaching us.

### **1. Overall 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 203,200 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; 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 ranked as the 69th most deprived Local Authority in England, of 326. In 2007, Luton was ranked as the 87th most deprived Local Authority and in 2004 as the 101st. This indicates that Luton is becoming relatively more deprived in comparison to the other Local Authorities of England. Luton has nine neighbourhoods ranking in the top 10% most deprived areas in the country. Of these, two each are located in Biscot, Dallow and Northwell wards, and one each in Farley, High Town and South wards.

#### Employment

There are 80,100 jobs in Luton, according to the Business Register and Employment Survey (BRES) 2011. Luton's major employers include Luton Borough Council, Luton NHS, Luton Airport, TUI UK Ltd, Monarch Airlines and General Motors. 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<sup>1</sup>. The unemployment rate in Luton of 5.45% (Luton South) and 4.5% (Luton North)<sup>2</sup> is higher than the national average of around 2.59% (July 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Luton, January 2012  
<http://www.luton.gov.uk/Environment/Lists/LutonDocuments/PDF/Planning/Observatory/Luton%20ASHE%20Report%20February%202010.pdf> [visited 20/09/2012]

<sup>2</sup> BBC Employment Tracker: Unemployment, based on Office for National Statistics Data, updated 12<sup>th</sup> September 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10604117> [visited 20/09/2012]

### Diversity

The town is ethnically diverse, with approximately a third of the population being of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) origin, with significant Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and African Caribbean communities. A recent pupil level school census (PLASC) showed that 51% of children (aged 0-15) are of BME origin. In recent years, the diversity of the population has increased with the arrival of significant numbers of Polish immigrants, as well as foreign students attending the University of Bedfordshire. The recent Mayhew Harper study also showed concentrations of new communities of Congolese, Somalians, Ghanaians, Nigerians, Turks and Zimbabweans.

### Challenges

The Luton context, as described above, has given rise to very specific challenges in the town. A local group of Muslim fanatics has 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 has successfully provoked anger amongst Muslims, and unrest amongst Christians and other faith communities too.

### Role of GRASSROOTS

All of these things indicate the great need for a programme like GRASSROOTS in Luton, which 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.

Although the media has often labelled Luton "a hotbed of terrorism", the town has maintained its calm and peace. Even the widespread riots of August 2011 did not affect Luton. Community mediation has worked and been effective to combat challenges and resist provocation on all sides.

While 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, GRASSROOTS' existence has always been precarious as we struggle to secure the core funding needed to enable our work.

This raises the following questions:

- Do we only value and notice peacekeeping in a war torn zone?
- Further, if specific styles of peacekeeping succeed in *preventing* conflict, rather than responding *after* conflict arises, do we inadvertently take them for granted?

The Big Society agenda demands ‘more for less’; GRASSROOTS has been delivering this for many years, and 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 GRASSROOTS’ work can continue to grow and flourish.

## **2. Why is GRASSROOTS uniquely placed to provide this support?**

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.

With our proven track record in building community cohesion and enabling inter faith inter-cultural 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, the GRASSROOTS team does 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 diverse communities.

GRASSROOTS’ work, and our methods of engagement, remain crucial in the current economic climate, as stereotyping and scapegoating of migrants and those who are perceived as ‘other’ always increases in economically constrained times. At the same time, GRASSROOTS 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.

GRASSROOTS’ link to the churches is a 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 uncertainty.

GRASSROOTS’ lead role in inter faith 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.

### 3. Looking to the Future

The following paragraphs aim to achieve three things:

- A consideration of how GRASSROOTS' work and methods complement the mission and priorities of the four Church denominations who are our main financial contributors.
- A consideration of how GRASSROOTS' work complements the Local Government agenda.
- Identifying future priorities for GRASSROOTS' work.

None of this is intended to be prescriptive, or to restrict the spontaneity and flexibility required for managing our work. Instead it aims to project GRASSROOTS' 'response-abilities' to the complex and sensitive community issues emerging from time to time.

The document is 'a work in progress'; 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.

### 4. What can GRASSROOTS offer? Complementing the Churches' Agenda

- a) **Church of England** The Church of England calls the church to be "a Christian presence in every community". GRASSROOTS, in partnership with various churches and organisations in Luton, is actively seeking to respond to the challenge of "being a Christian presence" in our hugely diverse local context, perceived by many on-lookers as intimidating. In some senses Luton has become a 'test case' for how different groups can live together in a town, and how diverse communities can respond constructively when tensions and grievances do arise. While Luton is often subject to negative media publicity, GRASSROOTS continues to work alongside Luton's communities, striving to demonstrate that there is 'another way' of peace.
- b) **Roman Catholic** The teaching of Vatican II states "Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture." (Nostra Aetate 2). GRASSROOTS works to enable encounter and build relationships between Luton's diverse communities in a manner of authentic witness and mutual respect; often, this happens most successfully through projects and events which are concerned with "working for the good of the world". The Conference of Bishops of England and Wales document *Meeting Friend in God and Stranger* states, "Dialogue is not restricted to academics, but takes place where everyday life is shared in an atmosphere of respect and openness." GRASSROOTS' work is very much concerned with finding, nurturing and developing that shared space where different groups can, and do, come together.

- c) **Methodist** A priority for the Methodist Church is “to proclaim and affirm its conviction of God’s love in Christ, for us and all the world; and to renew confidence in God’s presence and action in the world and in the church<sup>3</sup>”. Particular emphasis is placed on supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor; encouraging fresh ways of being Church; and nurturing a culture in the church which is people-centred and flexible. GRASSROOTS chooses to be a people-centred organisation, working in solidarity with the poor and underprivileged in the multicultural town of Luton. Our on-the-ground commitment resonates particularly with the Methodist mission of ‘becoming friends with people of different cultures and faiths, struggling for a just world, being alongside the poor, and caring for individual people and communities<sup>4</sup>.’
- d) **United Reformed Church** Much of GRASSROOTS’ work supports the ten priorities outlined in the United Reformed Church’s Vision 2020 mission plan, particularly those relating to Diversity, Justice and Peace, and Community Partnerships. The ecumenical composition of GRASSROOTS’ staff team, trustees and local partners reflects the URC’s value and priority of Christian Ecumenical Partnerships. For GRASSROOTS, partnership working is no mere coincidence; rather, this underpins our whole way of being. We are a deliberately ecumenical Christian charity which strives to work and build relationships across churches, and with all communities and faiths in Luton. GRASSROOTS is uniquely placed to challenge and enable the Christian Church to pioneer new ways of engaging in a diverse town and world, as “God’s people, transformed by the gospel, making a difference for Christ’s sake<sup>5</sup>.”

## 5. What can GRASSROOTS offer? Complementing the Government Agenda

- a) **Luton Forum** is Luton's Local Strategic Partnership. Its members are drawn from the public, business, community and voluntary sectors. The Forum’s Sustainable Community Strategy describes a shared vision of enabling people to flourish by fulfilling their potential, developing their skills and abilities, and boosting their personal and collective confidence. There is notable synergy between this, and GRASSROOTS’ own vision, concerned with enabling life in all its fullness, and good neighbourliness to be shared across all sections of society. As such, GRASSROOTS is well positioned to respond to the focus on ‘human flourishing for common good’, most especially by the faith and spiritual capital that we can bring to the table.
- b) **Luton Borough Council**, in its Service Level Agreement with Luton Council of Faiths, indicates an expectation for the delivery of specific services, including: provision of education, training and awareness activities enabling the growth of mutual understanding; identifying areas of potential conflict and division; and developing activities to reduce or resolve such problems and tensions. All of these are considered to contribute an inter faith dimension to the public life of the Borough. GRASSROOTS’ vision statement addresses all of these areas. While we have chosen

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<sup>3</sup> *Priorities for the Methodist Church*, <http://methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/vision-values/priorities-for-the-methodist-church> (viewed 09/05/2013)

<sup>4</sup> Methodist Mission, 1996, *Priorities for the Methodist Church, Our Calling*, <http://www.rethinkingmission.org.uk/pdfs/rtdmdec.pdf> (viewed 09/05/2013)

<sup>5</sup> *Catch The Vision* prayer

not to deliver these services directly, GRASSROOTS has empowered, and continues to work through, Luton Council of Faiths in delivering effective, innovative and imaginative programmes and activities which help meet the expectations of Luton Borough Council.

## 6. Our Future Priorities

In order to develop and expand the work GRASSROOTS is able to deliver, and to more effectively share our experience with communities both within and beyond the Luton context, we have identified three priorities for the short to mid-term future. All are mutually supporting, and all need to be addressed in order to maximise GRASSROOTS' future effectiveness.

**a) Communications:** Developing a Communication Plan and means to market GRASSROOTS such that interested parties can be made aware of what we are able to deliver on the ground, and our effectiveness can be more fully recognised by existing and potential partner agencies at the local, national and international levels. A further aim is to promote the GRASSROOTS ethos and vision with a view to encouraging participation and support in terms of time, skills, and financial contributions. This will also enable us to engage with a broader base of people, including Luton's newer communities and existing groups or individuals with whom we are not yet connecting.

**b) Training:** Developing a formalised training programme, with scope for marketing and networking, enabling experience to be shared and good practice cascaded. The programme might include themes such as:

- Cultural, Religious & Belief Awareness
- Developing Church Related Community Work
- Spirituality of Justice

These could be tailor-made to suit the needs and contexts of particular people and groups, and might range from short presentations to residential programmes focused on experiential learning.

**c) Human Resources:** Addressing our human resources needs in order to increase the effectiveness of GRASSROOTS' work, and to render our position more secure. Specifically, the existing GRASSROOTS team would greatly benefit from the addition of an Admin & Communications Officer, a Training & Networking Officer and a Finance Manager. Whilst aspects of these roles are currently carried out by the Coordinator, with part-time administrative support, at least 2 additional full-time Project Workers are needed to enable GRASSROOTS' overall portfolio to be developed, with particular emphasis on the areas of communications, training & networking.



## **8. Action Plan – Annual 5 Point Programme for 2012 – 2015**

The following section outlines an Annual 5 Point Action Plan for the years 2012-2015. The aim is to provide GRASSROOTS with a tangible focus for the short to mid-term future in order that identified priorities can be addressed, and essential financial requirements secured, even while we continue to review and deliver our existing work. The Plan will be adapted or extended as and when required.

### **Year 1 (Sep 2012- Aug 2013)**

1. Review existing areas and methods of working, and create space to identify possible new areas of work (Team)
2. Find resources to increase capacity (time and skills) of the existing part time admin staff to develop communications e.g. database, website and newsletters etc (Coordinator & Trustees)
3. Create job descriptions for specific volunteer roles in order to develop areas such as finance & fundraising, and IT & Computer Software (Admin & Team)
4. Identify and recruit a minimum of 2 new Trustees (Coordinator & Trustees)
5. Research, identify & write minimum of 3 funding bids to support innovative ideas for strengthening ecumenical & inter faith relations (Coordinator & Trustees)
6. Initiate the process of undertaking a theological reflection (Trustees & Team)

### **Year 2 (Sep 2013 – Aug 2014)**

1. Design and produce resources which communicate our work in the Luton context - display boards, leaflets, website, photo and newsprint archives to be used for promotional stalls at conferences, seminars and other local & national events (Team & Volunteers)
2. Design and publish our first Newsletter, with a view to sustaining a regular Quarterly Newsletter (Admin & Team)
3. Strengthen networking and partnerships with the churches and related bodies to substantiate and enhance the existing levels of support (Trustees)
4. Explore the establishment of a 'Friends of GRASSROOTS' Group (Admin & Team)
5. Research, identify & write minimum of 1 funding bid to support each of these areas of work:
  - developing a Training Programme at and through GRASSROOTS
  - sustain the ongoing work of Making Luton a Fairtrade Town
  - support innovative ideas for strengthening ecumenical & inter faith relations (Coordinator & Trustees)

### **Year 3 (Sep 2014 – Aug 2015)**

1. Continue to strengthen networking and partnerships with the churches and related bodies to substantiate and enhance existing levels of support (Trustees)
2. Explore the possibility of developing a varied programme of training (Coordinator & Training Project Officer)
3. Explore ideas for commemorating 25 years of GRASSROOTS' service to Luton (Trustees & Team)
4. Ensure all communication tools are well executed e.g. Website, Newsletters, Friends group, volunteering etc. (Admin & Coordinator)
5. Research, identify & write minimum of 1 funding bid for each of the following areas:
  - commemorating 25 years of GRASSROOTS service
  - supporting innovative ideas for strengthening ecumenical & inter faith relations (Coordinator & Trustees)

## 9. Appendix I - How we came into being

Formed in 1991 with the help of Christian Aid and the Methodist Church, GRASSROOTS became a network of various Church denominations and organisations including CMS (Church Missionary Society), Oxfam, World Development Movement, USPG (United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, to be known as United Society from November 2012), and CAFOD (Catholic Agency For Overseas Development). All these agencies sent representatives to act as trustees of GRASSROOTS, and the organisation was registered as a charity in 1996. Mission Partners were invited from countries of the south and east to work on projects in partnership with the local churches and ecumenical groups. Over the years, due to financial and other constraints, the representative role of Trustees has diminished. Currently, most of our trustees come from different Christian denominations, but serve through personal choice, rather than representing any particular denomination or group.

## 10. Appendix II - Resource Summary

GRASSROOTS currently has 1 full-time Co-ordinator, 1 part-time Administrator and 2 part-time Project Workers. In addition, there is 1 full-time Church Related Community Worker, paid directly by the United Reformed Church (URC).

Approximately £100,000 is required to sustain GRASSROOTS' current level of staffing & work activities, of which £40,000 is contributed by four Church denominations Church of England St Albans Diocese £13,000, Catholic Diocese of Northampton £12,000, Methodist Dist of Beds, Essex & Herts £10,000, URC Thames North Synod Trust £5,000) and £10,000 from Luton Council of Faiths. The remainder is raised mainly by writing bids to various grant schemes, trusts, and any government funding pots announced from time to time.

## 11. Appendix III – Diagram of GRASSROOTS' Structure

