



What Matters to Us?

Unitarian and Free Christian Social Action Survey

Spring 2024





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Introduction

At the start of 2024, the world faces many challenges, including climate change, economic injustice, racism, anti-LGBTQIA+ prejudice, and so many more. Unitarians and Free Christians, alongside many other people of all faiths and none, feel themselves called to take action to try to address these challenges facing human society.

As a small movement with around 2,500 registered members¹, we face the question of how to ensure the resources that we have available are used in the most effective way to address the issues that matter. To this end, a small team of Unitarian professionals carried out research to explore these issues in detail and to present the findings to the 2024 General Assembly.

This research was done via two online surveys, one for individuals and one for congregations, followed by a series of focus groups. The focus groups helped the team dig deeper into the questions and gather anecdotal information for each of the questions.

We would like to thank everyone who took part in this research for taking the time to give their views and take part in discussions.

How we carried out the research

The research took place over February-March 2024. The team consisted of the Unitarian Social Action Officer, Ann Howell, two ministers – Rev. Winnie Gordon and Rev. Stephanie Bisby – and a lay worship leader, Louise Reeve. The latter three all have backgrounds in research and/or statistical analysis. It was supported by a grant from the Bowland Trust.

The team decided on a mixed-methods approach. First, we used two online surveys, one for individual Unitarians and Free Christians, and another for congregations. This was intended to gather broad information about individuals' views on social issues and congregations' capacity for social action. We then explored these in more depth using three focus groups. By timing these groups for a Saturday morning, a weekday afternoon and a weekday evening, we hoped to offer a wide range of people the chance to take part.

Analysis of findings was carried out using spreadsheets, with frequency analysis used for the closed questions, and thematic analysis for the open-ended questions (in other words, those asking for detailed comments).

What Matters to Individual UK Unitarians and Free Christians in 2024?

When analysing the findings of the individual survey, it is clear that the 'top four' issues of concern are:

1. Economic justice
2. Housing and homelessness
3. Peace initiatives, including Gaza and Ukraine
4. Climate justice

These four issues were the ones that concerned most respondents personally and had the highest percentage of people actively supporting action to address them.

¹ Source: The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches Annual Report 2022. Please note that this is the total of registered members; there are many more individuals who attend Unitarian and Free Christian

When asked what issues respondents thought most affected their local area, the 'top three' were housing, food insecurity, and pollution or other climate-related issues.

When asked how they actively supported taking action on these issues (if they did), the majority of those taking part gave money (78%), followed by 'actively campaigning', and attending regular meetings. Asked about why they felt driven to act on these issues, the majority of those taking part (72%) said they felt that resolving injustice was the path to a healthier society, followed by 'I feel it is my moral duty', and / or that 'the government is not doing enough to tackle these issues'.

The largest single percentage of respondents (36% - 57 people) said that they spent 1-5 hours per week actively engaging with these issues. The largest single percentage of respondents (42% - 66 people) said that they were currently as active on social issues as they would like to be; of those who did want to be more active, the largest percentages said that they would be more active if their congregation were more active (18%) and / or the Unitarian movement were more active (13%). When asked about what UK Unitarian social action initiatives they were aware of, just over half said that they were aware of the Unitarians 4 Climate Justice group, followed by the Unitarian Peace Fellowship (50%) and Red Cross Appeals (49%).

Further insight from focus groups

"My social action is always driven by human rights, that's the top thing for me, the ones in the UN declaration. [...] Everybody has the right to clothing, food, healthcare... there isn't a single country in the world that has fully implemented it, and now we're seeing the NHS being torn apart and the rest we haven't even started on."

"[In my city] There is a lot of homelessness, people living on the streets, unaffordable housing and poor housing stock. There is a reputation for diversity but it's racially very homogenous. There is a large LGBT+ population and a lot of support groups/services so we could end up duplicating, or does it mean there's higher demand?"

"My children and I grew up middle class and it was quite shocking for me to discover the awful conditions many of our children live in and the responsibilities they have, like child carers. [...] And children are coming out of care at 16 with the responsibility of adults when they've not had training how to be adult."

About the people who took part

Just over half of all respondents (54%) were aged 65 and over, and just over half (54%) gave their gender as female. The region with the largest single group of individual responses was the NorthWest (35 people), followed by the Midlands.

What Matters to UK Unitarians and Free Christian Congregations in 2024?

When analysing the findings of the congregational survey, we can see that the top issues of concern to congregations are:

1. Climate justice
2. Peace initiatives, including Gaza and Ukraine
3. Mental health support

When asked what issues those answering on behalf of their congregations thought most affected their local area, the 'top three' were housing and homelessness (68%), food insecurity (61%), refugee support (56%).

The 'top three' activities congregations are doing to support action on social issues are monetary collections or other donations for charities (91%), collecting food or other items for local charities (68%), and providing subsidised or free hall or other space rental to community groups (49%).

We asked congregations what assets they had to support action on social issues. Their 'top three' answers were: their building (88%), active trustees or committee (77%) and proximity to public transport (75%).

We asked congregations what the barriers to their doing social action activities were, and what resources they needed. The top two answers (apart from 'other') were: a lack of 'people power, needing more leaders and volunteers' (75%) and 'more support on how to engage with these issues' (33%).

About the congregations who took part

The single largest number of congregations in the survey – 22 congregations – had between 30-49 members. Looking at age ranges, the single largest age group represented in the congregations' age ranges was people aged 65 and over – 41 of the 57 congregations had over 50% of their regular attenders in this age range. The single largest number of congregations in the survey – 13 congregations – were from the London District and South Eastern Provincial Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (LDPA). When asked about the diversity of their congregations, 79% (44 congregations) said that they had members who were hearing impaired. Over 71% (40 congregations) indicated that they had members who were LGBTQi+. The next most common aspects of congregation members were 'being physically disabled' (66%) and 'being neurodiverse' (41%).

Further insight from the comments

"Our congregation is quite scattered in towns and villages around [our area], which makes it difficult for some to participate in person at our city centre church location. In fact, the majority of our trustees live outside the city. The trustees are heavily involved in keeping the buildings and the week-by-week congregational life going while also juggling work, family commitments and personal social or community action, which doesn't leave much time for community social action."

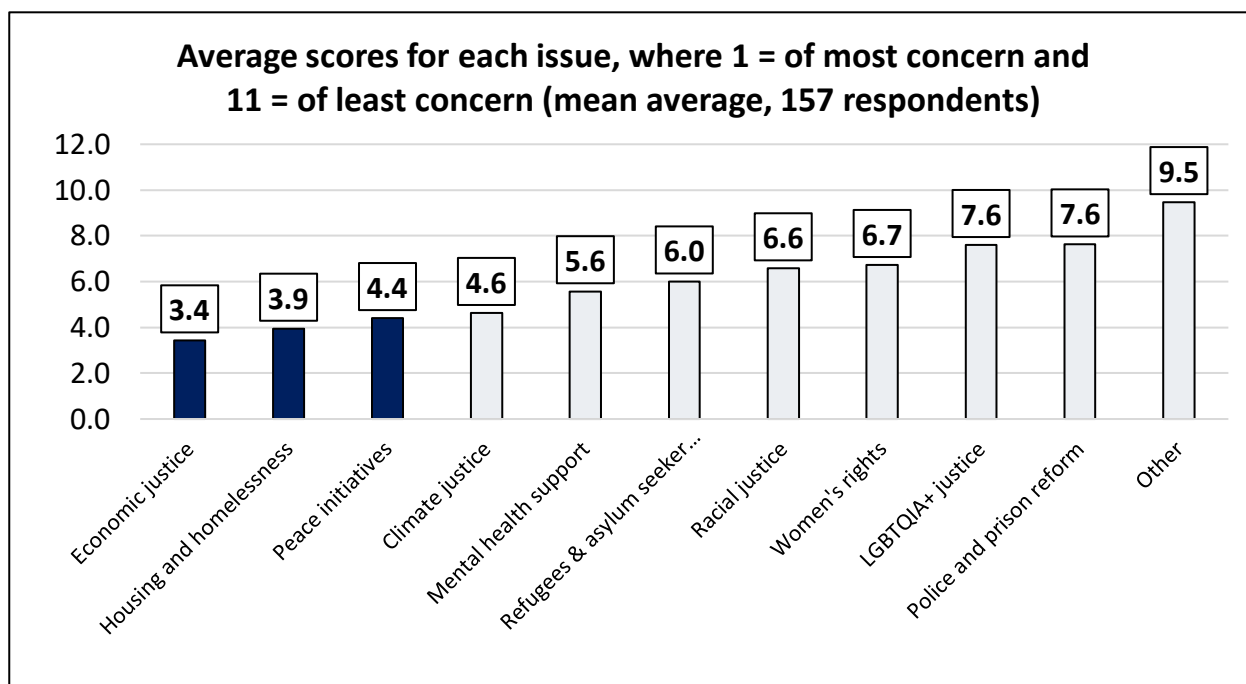
"Our congregation has an active social justice group and has recently joined Citizens UK. We support [a local project for asylum seekers] with donations. We have 4-6 special collections per year for charities, including peace initiatives. The social justice group highlights issues outside our chapel through letters and articles in local newspapers."

"Our congregation are good-hearted and passionate people who care for others, unfortunately, age and infirmity restrict our involvement in wider social issues. We do however have a thriving garden and nature cafe group who tend our chapel gardens, grow vegetables and cook and serve lunches to growing numbers each week. Many of the group are not actually members of our congregation, but we do regard them as important to the chapel and work very much in partnership to support each other and donate funds to other local charities."

Section 1 - Findings from the Individual Survey

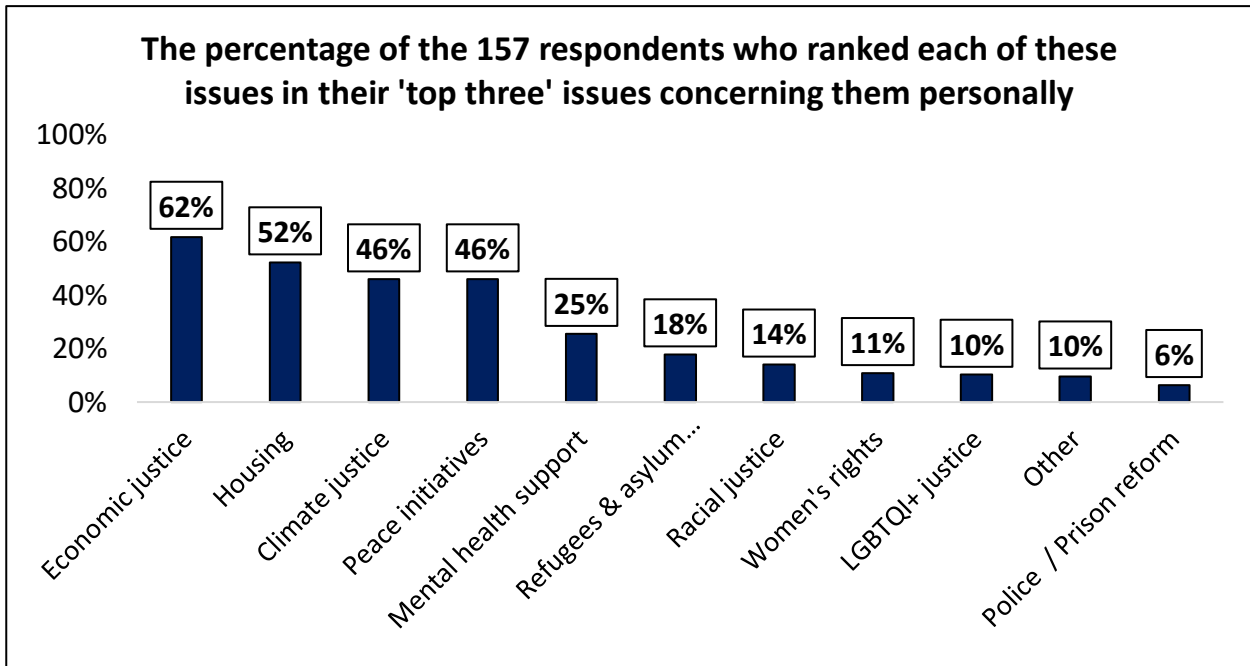
1. The issues that concern me most are...

We asked respondents to put 11 options representing major contemporary social issues into order from 1-11, with '1' being the issue that concerned them most, and '11' being the issue that concerned them least (relative to the other options). One way to make sense of these responses is to take the mean average of all responses for a particular issue. As shown in the chart below, this indicates that economic justice, housing & homelessness, and peace initiatives were the 'top three' issues of most concern to those taking part.



Another approach when analysing these findings is to say that an issue is considered as being of high importance if people put it in their 'top three' – ranking it in first, second, or third place. This reflects the difficulty of selecting a single issue as being of more importance than another, as several respondents commented on, and the reality that many people are concerned about several issues at once.

When analysed using this approach, as shown in the chart on the next page, the issues that the highest percentage of people taking part put in their 'top three' were economic justice (62%), housing and homelessness (52%), with climate justice and peace initiatives including Gaza & Ukraine being 'tied' for third place with 46% each.



Percentages shown are the percentages of responses received for each option in the range 1-3, divided by the number of people taking part.

Further insight from focus groups

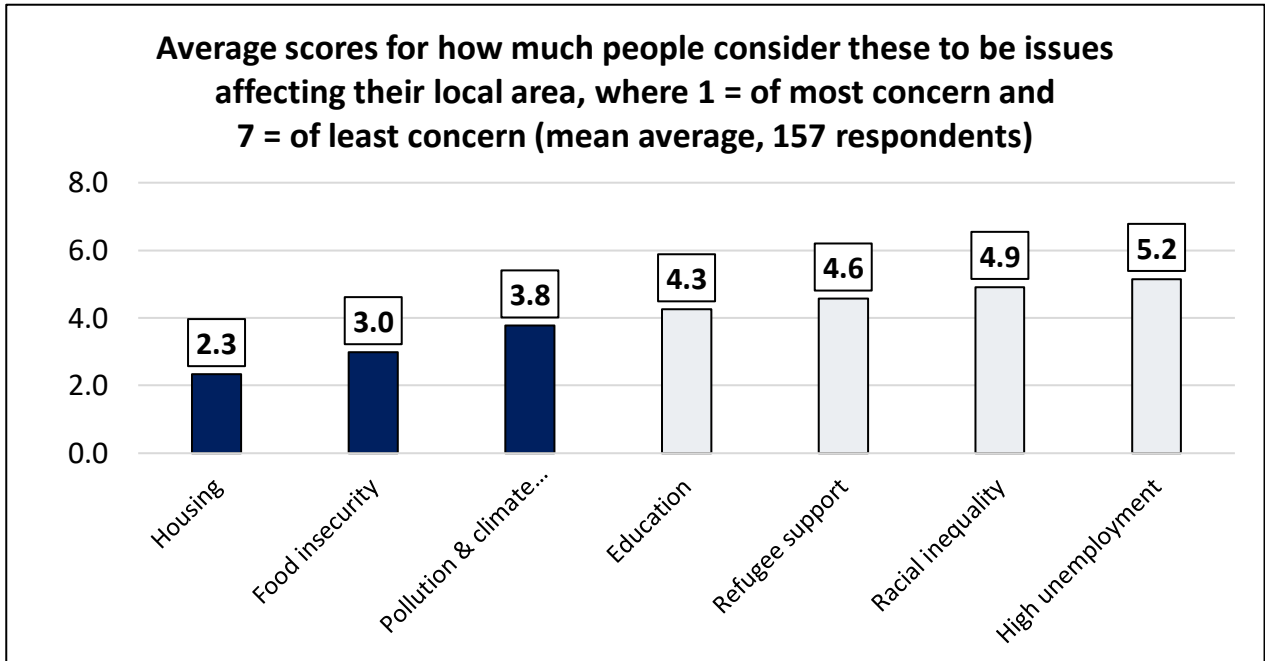
Several people used the open space at the end of the questionnaire to comment on the difficulty and/or validity of ranking causes in order, and so this was an area we chose to follow up on in more detail in the focus groups.

“At any point in time, one [issue] will come to the top, but none will stay at the top forever. They’re not silos, they’re interrelated. Peace is big, and also women’s issues. We need to address the backlash or we’ll be destroying the progress which has been made in a time when more progress needs to be made.”

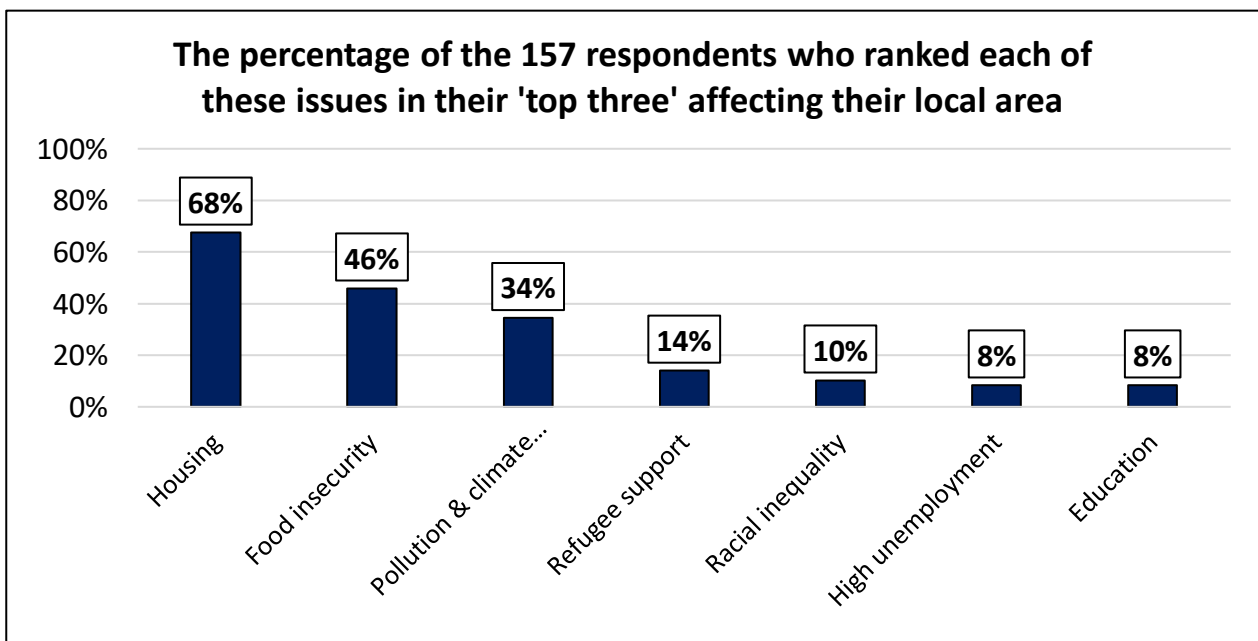
2. The main social issues that affect my local area are...

Next, we asked respondents to put these 7 options into order from 1-7, with '1' being the social issue that they thought was the one most affecting their local area and '7' being the issue that concerned them least (relative to the other options).

When we look at the findings using the 'average' method, we learn that housing, food insecurity and pollution & climate change are the three issues which the largest proportion of respondents think affect their local area.



If we take the 'top three' approach to analysis (where an issue is considered of high importance if people rank it in the 'top three' issues of concern in their local area), we see the same findings. The chart shows that the issues that the highest percentage people put in their 'top three' issues that they thought most affected their local area were housing (68%), food insecurity (46%), and pollution or other climate issues (34%).



Further insight from focus groups

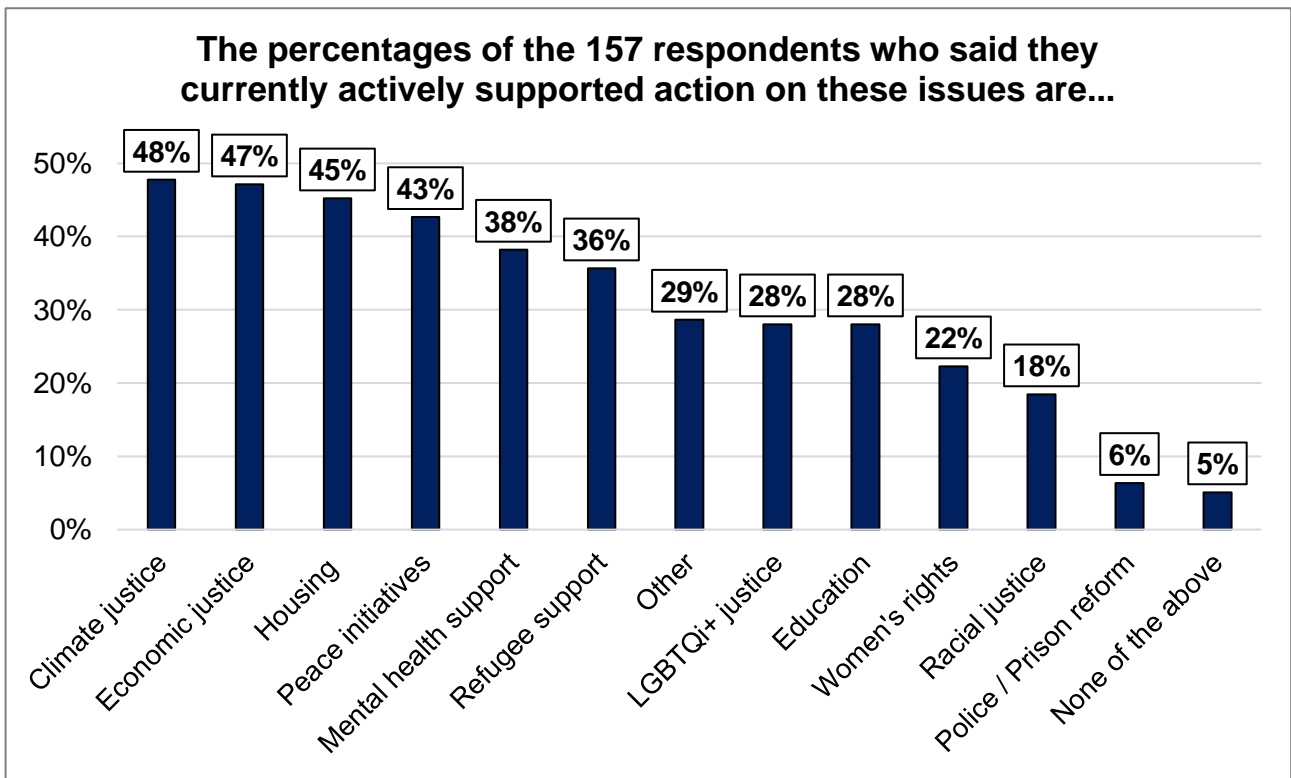
“A local politician was lamenting young people not paying attention to politics and was told, ‘If you paid any attention to climate, young people might pay attention to you.’”

“We’re a city of sanctuary so we get a lot of refugees but there is a structure, we get call outs for ‘can you give someone a bed?’, so they’re not sleeping on the streets.”

“Our city is like a microcosm of the north of England. It’s quite a divided place in many ways. It’s got an urban core which is quite left wing and progressive and rural outskirts which are very right wing and old fashioned. And it’s quite segregated as a city. It breaks itself up into different communities that have different class and racial identities. That’s historical but it hasn’t been fixed. There’s nothing I can say about the city as a whole, because it’s so different from place to place.”

3. The issues I currently actively support are...

We then asked respondents which social issues they currently ‘actively supported’, in the sense of taking action to address these issues. We should note that respondents could reply they were taking action on any or all of these issues, to reflect the reality that many people support action on more than one cause at once. Unsurprisingly given the earlier responses, the ‘top four’ issues in response to this question were climate justice, economic justice, housing, and peace initiatives.



Issues mentioned under ‘other’ by more than one person included disability/disability rights (4), food poverty (4), religious freedom/interfaith (3), cancer (2), animal welfare (2) and elderly/end of life care (2). Several people used the comment space to draw attention to specific aspects of broader categories, for example biodiversity, which could be categorised under environmental justice, or nuclear disarmament, as an aspect of peace.

Further insight from focus groups

“LGBT+ support — ‘Pride’ is a highlight of the year. Get a good reaction from the crowd with our banner. Raise money for causes, invite speakers on social issues. Several homeless people come in

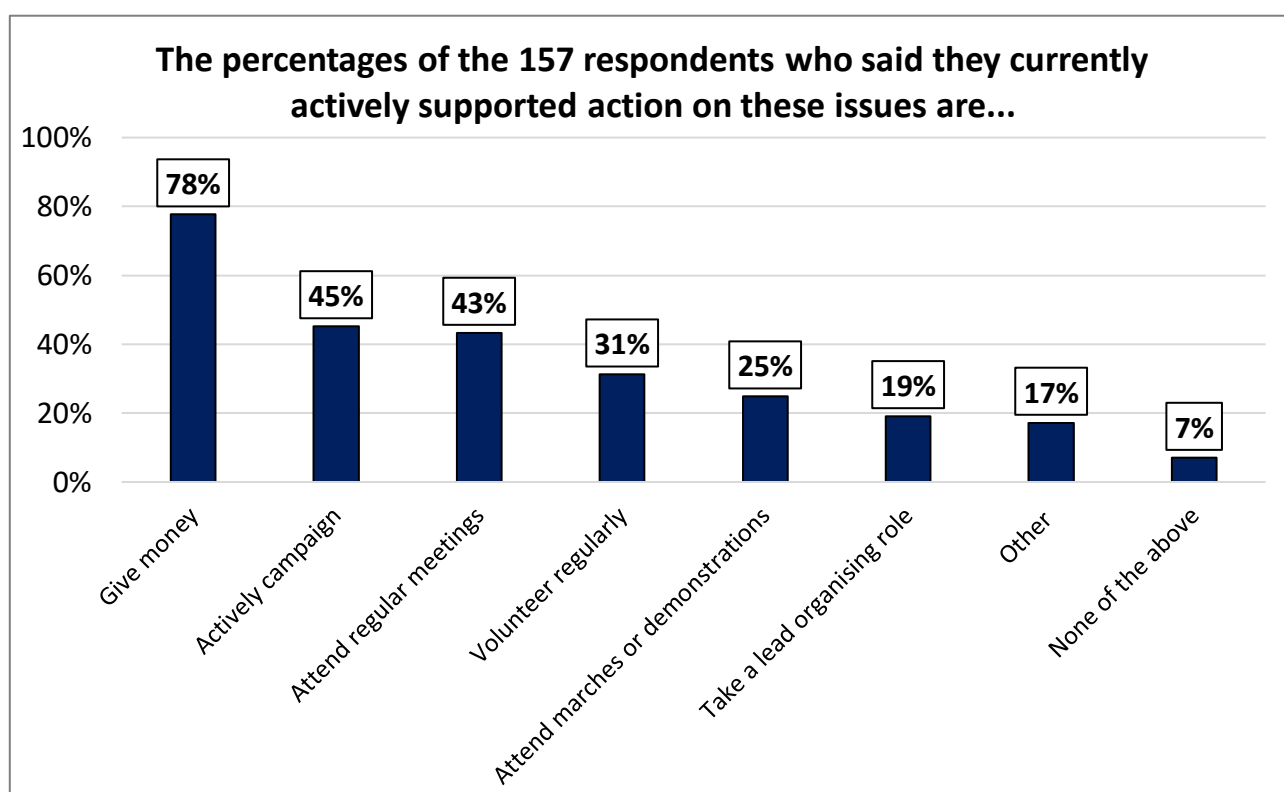
and use chapel to charge their phones/have a cuppa. The caretaker has sleeping bags to give out if needed – that shouldn't have to be the case!"

"Climate underlies all the other things. If we don't address that we can't address any other issues. If we don't have a liveable climate none of the other things matter. More people feel affected by and care about that."

4. The way that I support these issues is to...

We then asked respondents about how they actively supported taking action on these issues (if they did). Again, they could choose as many options as applied to them. As shown below, the majority of those taking part gave money, followed by 'actively campaigning' (defined in the question as 'letter-writing, engaging with MPs or corporate leaders, leafletting, etc.')

and attending regular meetings (either in person or off-line).



When we review what those who said 'other' replied, a more detailed picture emerges. Three people mentioned campaigning (presumably seeing some distinction between this and the option of 'active campaigning' which was supplied) and three more mentioned petitions. Other specific forms of support mentioned by just a few people were food banks, providing accommodation for the homeless or refugees, mental health support groups and reading/researching (sometimes online). One person each mentioned visiting the elderly, volunteer litter picking, and knitting items for donation.

Further insight from focus groups

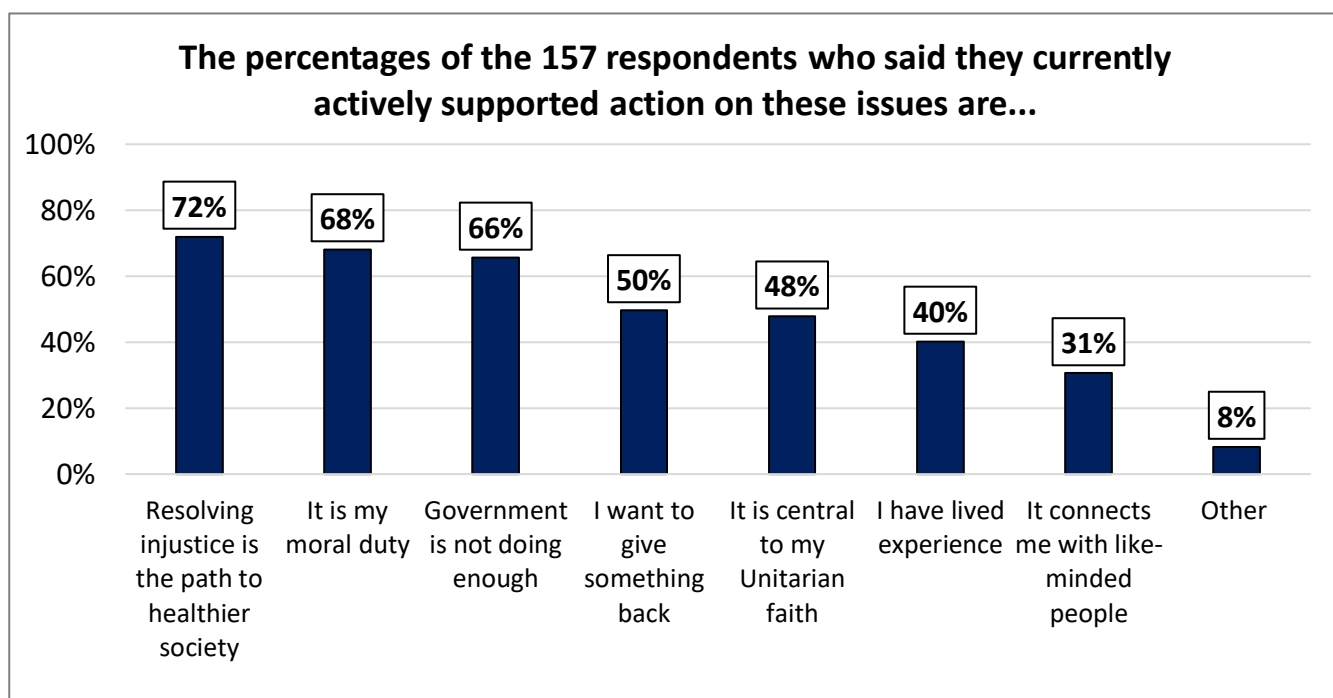
"One thing we can all do is, in the nicest possible way, challenge people, friends and family, who have attitudes to women, people of different races, people of different sexualities, and have

reasonable conversations because at the individual level you can change the way people think. Maybe we need some training in that, but I think it's very powerful.

Also, it doesn't all have to be worthy; you can have fun! For example a choir working with a sister choir of survivors of torture. Doing hobbies, but being inclusive and informing ourselves and others helps."

5. I feel driven to act on these issues because ...

When asked about why they felt driven to act on these issues, the majority of those taking part (nearly three-quarters) said they felt that resolving injustice was the path to a healthier society. Around two-thirds said they felt it was their moral duty, and / or that the government is not doing enough to tackle these issues. Again, respondents could choose as many options as they saw fit.



When we review what those who said 'other' replied answers were broadly similar, with slight adaptations for personal style. Similar to 'resolving injustice' were: "being a citizen," "I care about injustice" and "It is up to each and every one of us to do what we can to repair injustices and try to leave the world in a better place for those who come after us. Everything is connected."

Along the same lines as 'central to my Unitarian faith' were "it is part of religious/spiritual life" and "it is part of a demand for a new global theology." One person drew our attention to the UUA article 2, a statement of the UUA's shared values roughly comparable to the GA's Object.

Further insight from focus groups

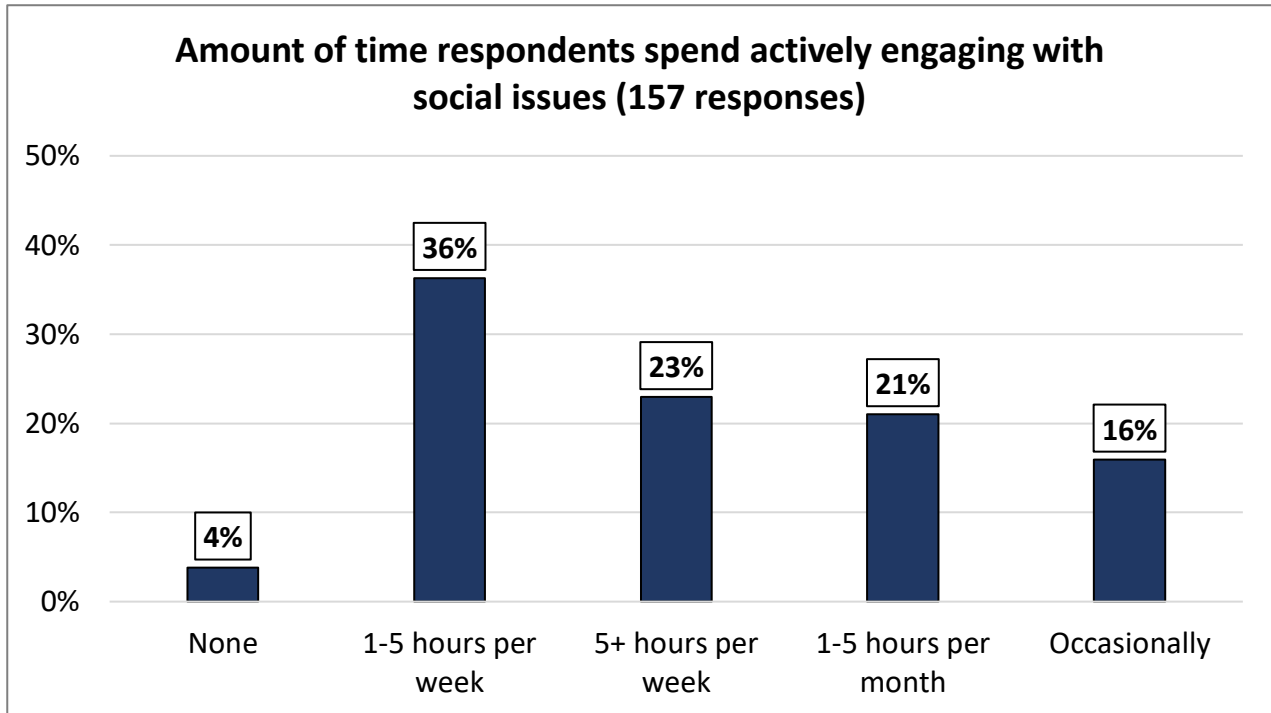
"I was angry when I found out in 2014 that the UN had known for years about climate change and not made a single decision and that spurred me to start working in social justice."

"For children/grandchildren so they have a better world to grow up in."

"I can relate to all the reasons given except being 'blessed' – I'm not privileged, am in a number of marginalised groups. It's a moral duty to try to help change communities, not from a position of power or privilege. In the social justice space there's not always the same respect for healthy debate and difference that there is in church. Faith perspectives inform social action."

6. How much time do people spend acting on these issues?

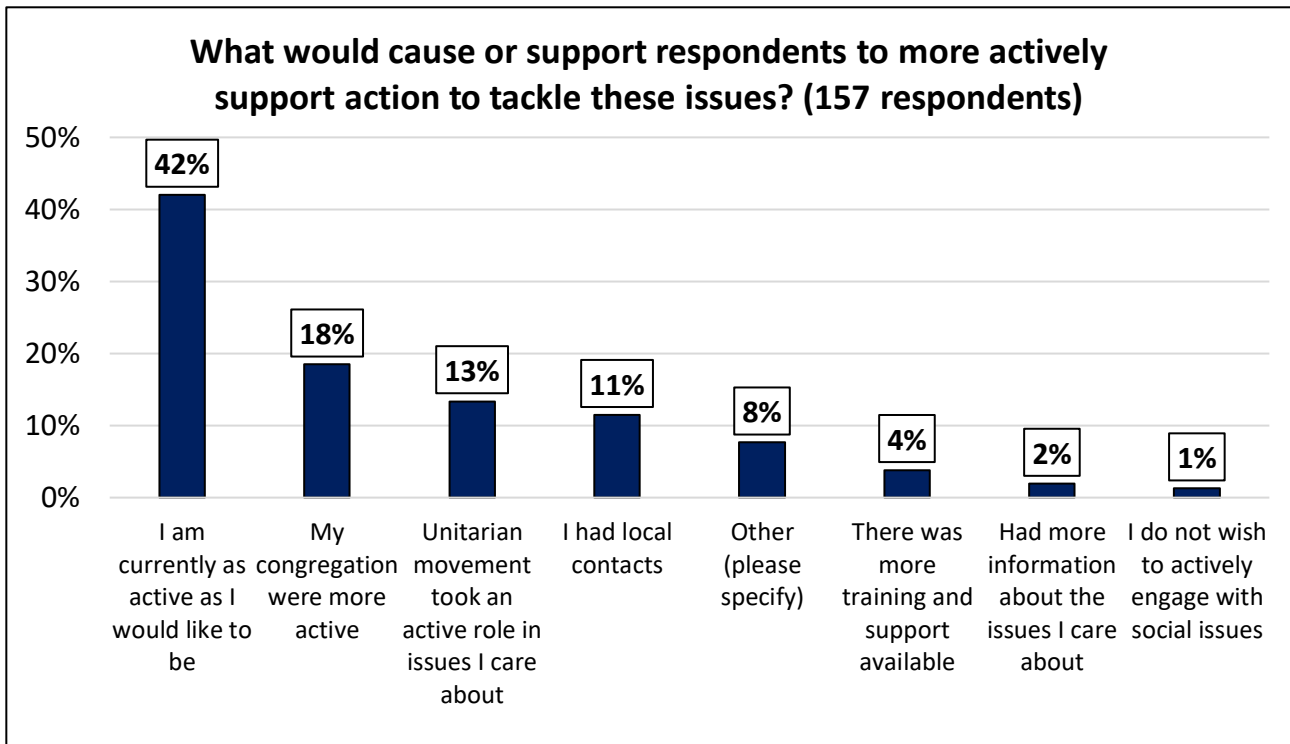
A significant portion (23% - 38 people) said that they spent over 5 hours per week on social action. The largest single percentage of respondents (36% - 57 people) said that they spent 1-5 hours per



week actively engaging with these issues. That means that over 50% of respondents engage with social action on a weekly basis.

7. I would engage more with social issues if...

The largest single percentage of respondents (42% - 66 people) said that they were currently as active on social issues as they would like to be. The largest proportions of those who did want to be more active said that they would be more active if their congregation were more active (18%) and / or the Unitarian movement were more active (13%). Additional responses in the comments were 'if I were in better health' and 'if I had more time.'



Further insight from focus groups

"[I would like] more opportunities for networking and finding out what others have done and how."

"Connection with others. I've been involved for 12+ years and it's odd that two chapels five miles apart have no idea what the other is doing. I used to do touring services and found chapels like discovering little 'terrorist cells'! It comes from history, having to be secret because the authorities would sell dissenters out."

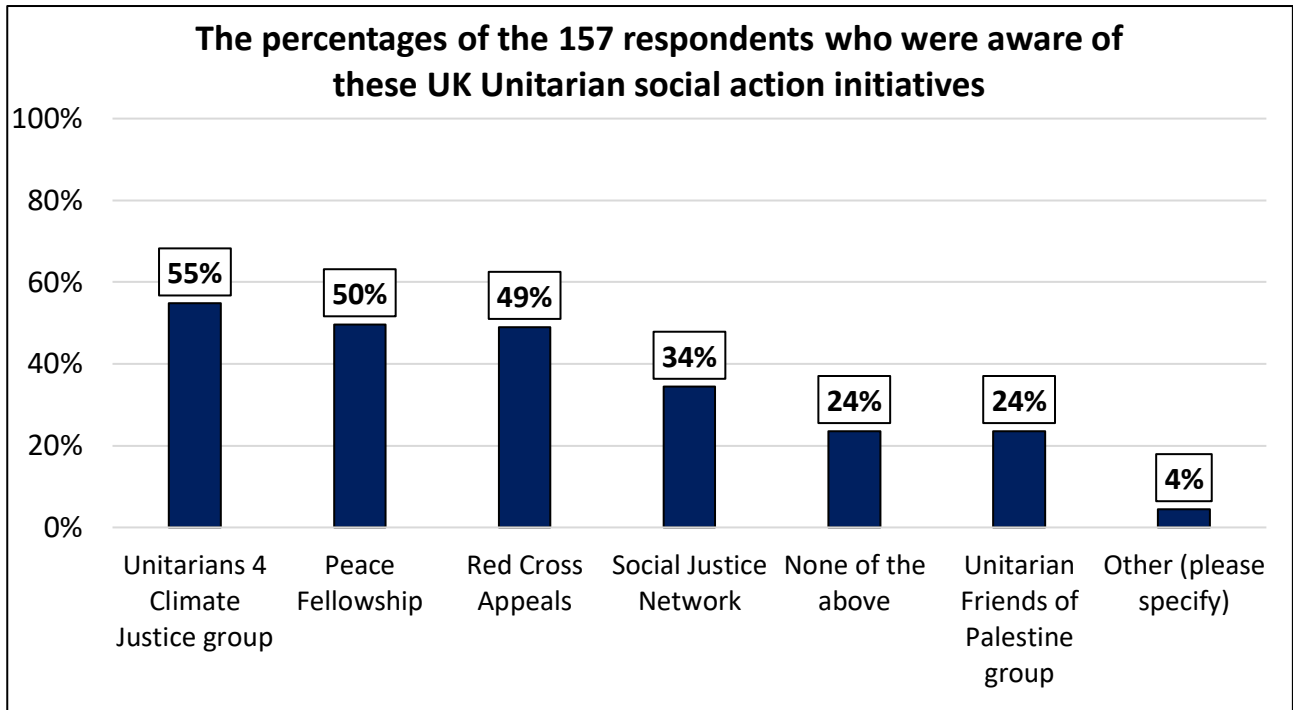
"We shouldn't need to reinvent the wheel. City centre chapels linking with outer chapels would be good. Apart from the newsletter we don't have much clue about each other."

"More local links for organising Social Action would be good, like zoom calls and shared resources. It's good to hear that things are set up but we're starting from a point of not having much so it would be useful to hear from people who have taken a lead."

"Why I stepped back from stuff – you put your hand up to do stuff and the centre will want you to do it for nothing. Nobody pays for newsletters, committees. There's an expectation that we'll all work for nothing, that we're all happy amateurs, and it tends to be those people who do, do more. I tend to be wary, because I lead stuff."

8. I am aware of the following UK Unitarian social action initiatives...

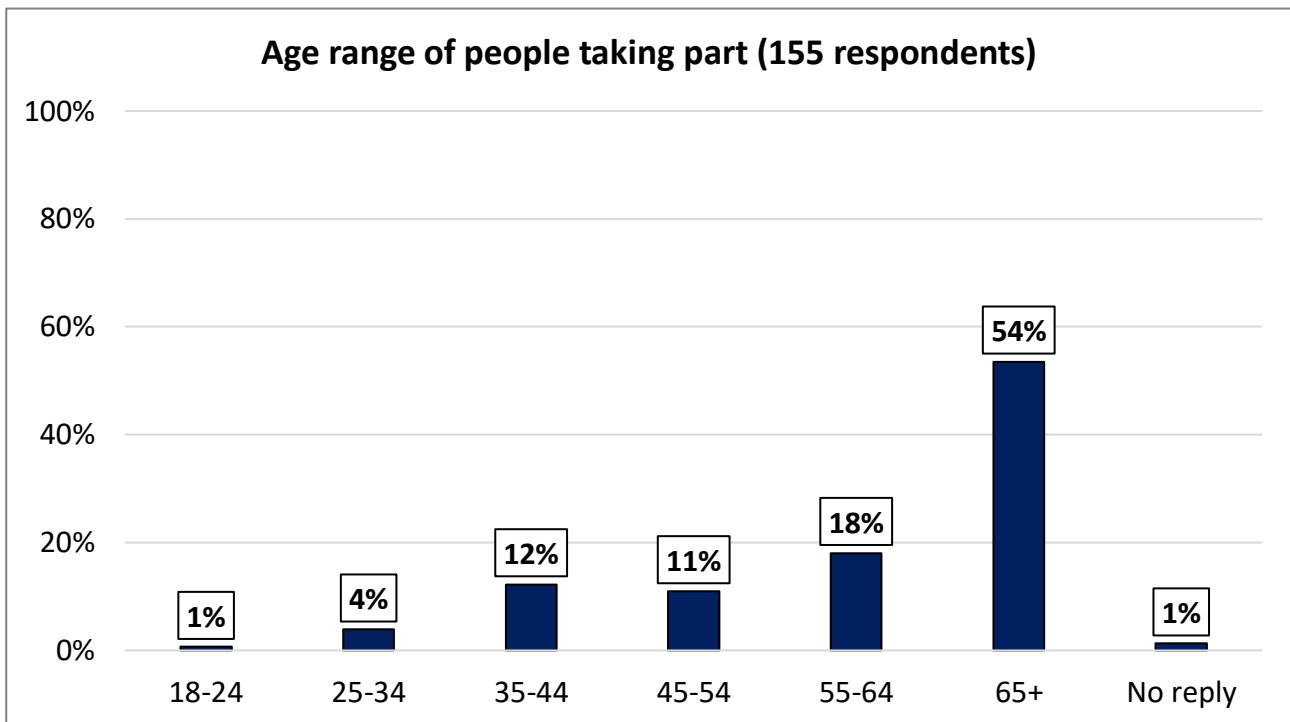
The largest single percentage of respondents (55% - 86 people) said that they were aware of the Unitarians 4 Climate Justice group – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the importance placed on action on these issues evident in earlier questions – followed by the Unitarian Peace Fellowship (50%) and Red Cross Appeals (49%).



Additions from those who wrote in 'other' responses were Send a Child to Hucklow, the Penal Affairs Group, (2 mentions each) and 'support for persecuted Christians and other religious minorities'.

9. Age range

Just over half of all respondents (54%) were aged 65 and over.



10. Gender

Just over half of all respondents (54% - 84 people) gave their gender as female.

Female: 54%

Male: 39%

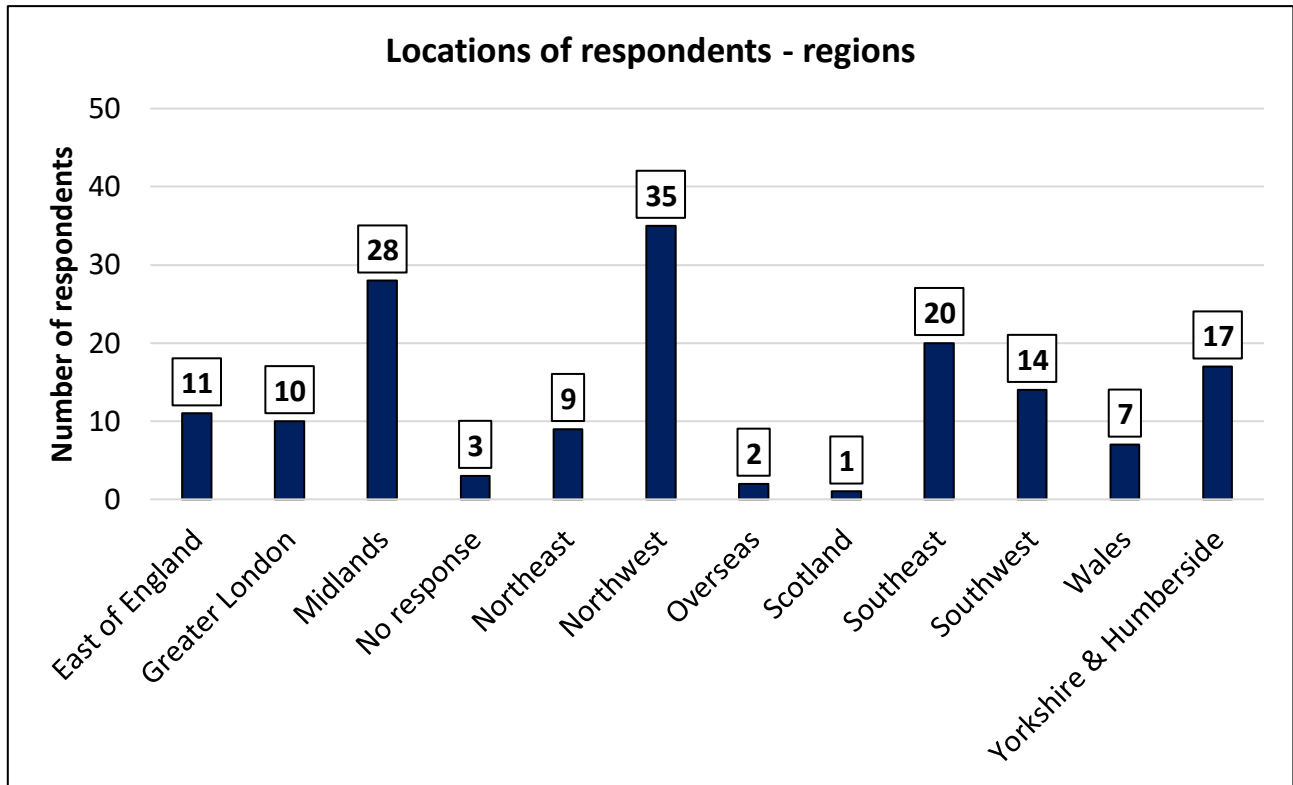
Non-binary: 4%

Prefer not to say: 4%

[OB]

11. Locations

The region with the largest single group of responses was the NorthWest (35 people), followed by the Midlands.



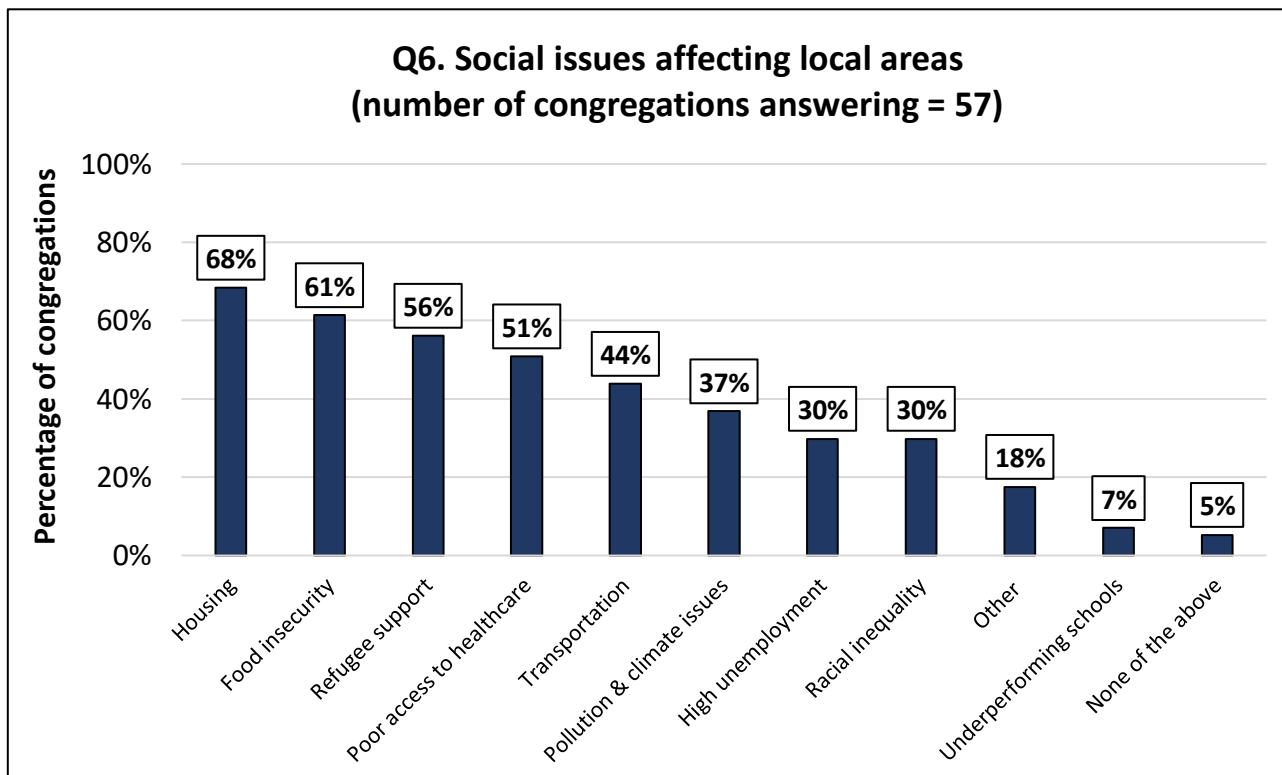
Section 2 - Findings from the Congregational Survey

1. Social issues in congregations' areas

We asked congregations about what social issues they thought most affected people in their local area (note that we did not ask respondents to rank them in order of importance, as we did for individuals responding). As shown in the chart below, the 'top three' answers were:

1. Housing (homelessness, poor quality housing) = 68%
2. Food insecurity = 61%
3. Refugee and asylum seeker support = 56%

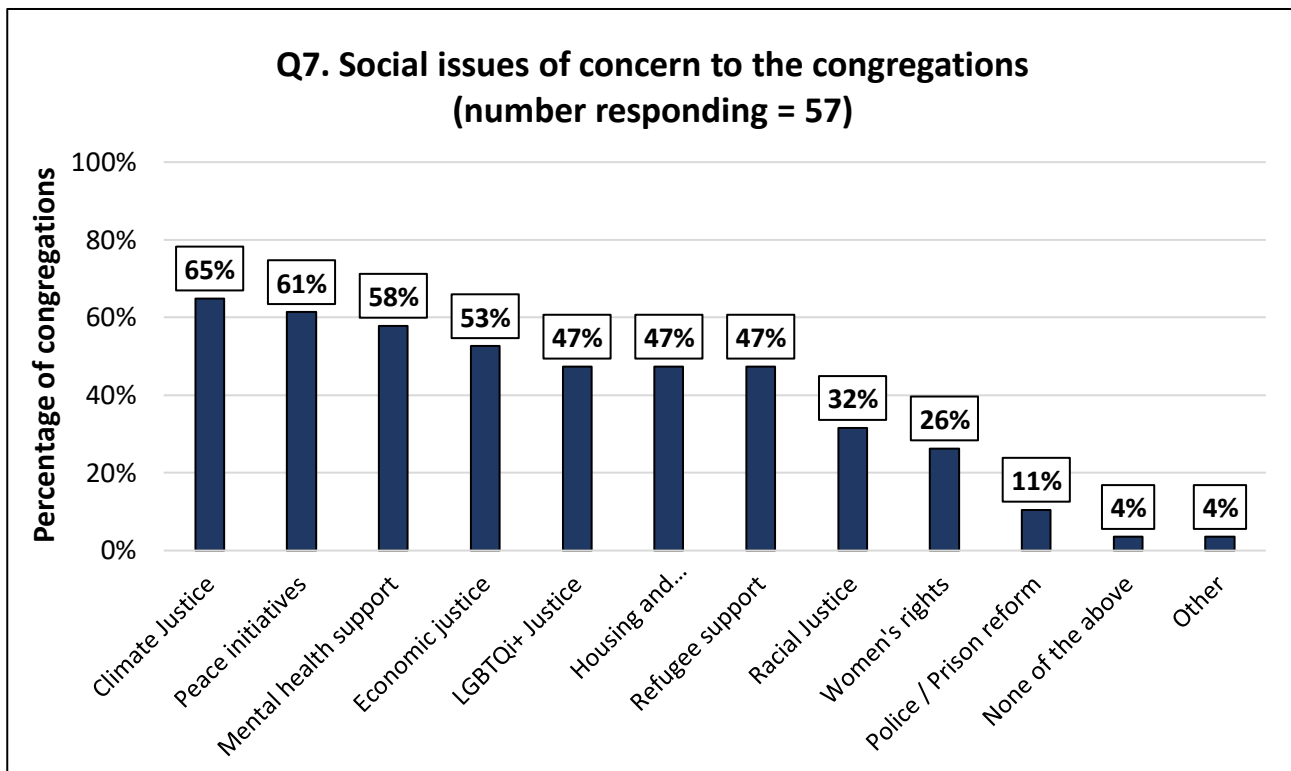
Given the small numbers of respondents, the issues added under 'other' did not significantly impact the overall result, with additions mentioned singly including, 'poverty' and 'cost of living', 'disability', 'knife crime, poor access to social care', 'low wages and casual work', 'no access to NHS dentists' and 'rough sleeping'. Two people mentioned loneliness, one in general and one particularly in relation to the elderly.



2. Congregations' concerns

We asked congregations about what social were of most concern to the congregations (again, we did not ask respondents to rank them in order of importance). As shown in the chart below, the 'top three' answers were:

1. Climate justice = 65%
2. Peace initiatives = 61%
3. Mental health support = 58%



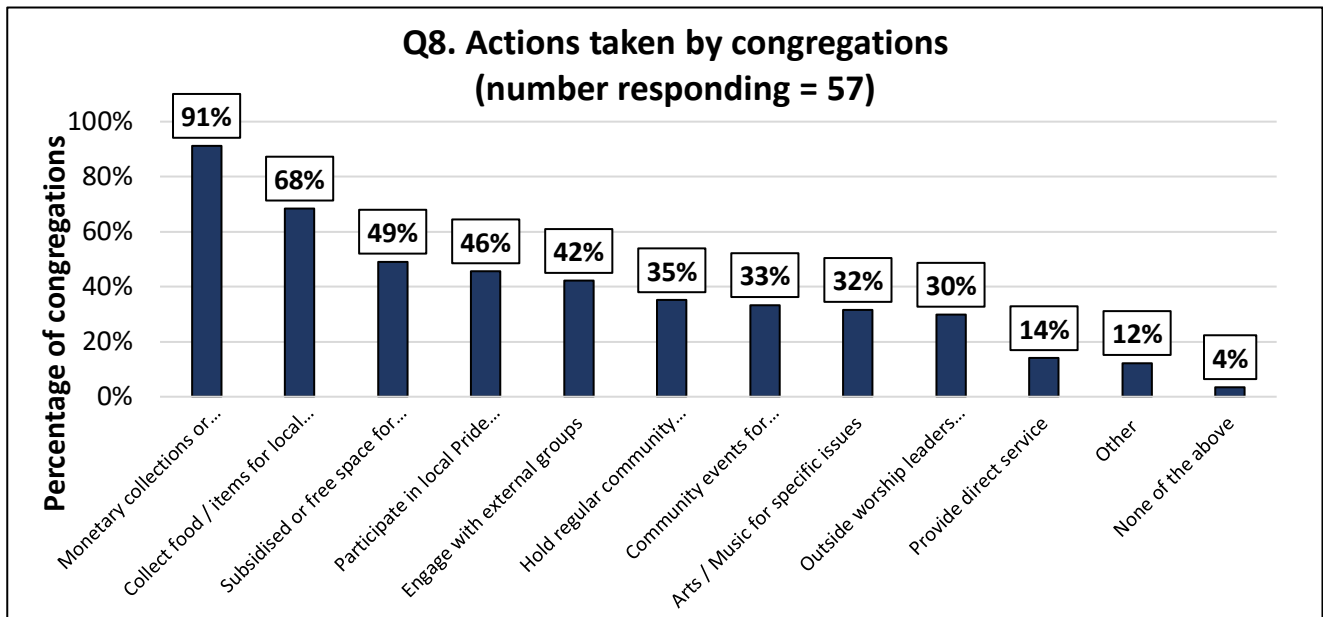
Given the small numbers of respondents, the issues added under 'other' did not significantly impact the overall result, with additions mentioned singly including, 'access to justice', 'amnesty', 'biodiversity', 'food poverty', 'health inequalities', 'mobility', 'rural isolation' and 'interfaith'.

It is interesting to note that this is noticeably different to the social issues affecting the local area, as perceived in the first question. This may be an area for congregations to investigate if they consider new social action initiatives.

3. Activity types that the congregation currently engages in

We asked congregations what sort of activities they were doing to support actions on social issues. As shown in the chart below, the 'top three' answers were:

1. Monetary collections or other donations for charities = 91%
2. Collect food or other items for local charities (homelessness, refugees, and so on) = 68%
3. Providing subsidised or free hall or other space rental to community groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Scouts, playgroups, and so on) = 49%



Actions mentioned singly include 'annual community garden party', 'interfaith collaboration', 'music concerts', 'monthly online activity to promote dialogue/debate between those with different views', 'being a registered warm space', 'installing a defibrillator for community use' and 'founding and running a community legal centre'. One congregation commented on being limited due to not owning a building, a comment which ties in with the following question regarding community assets.

4. Congregational assets

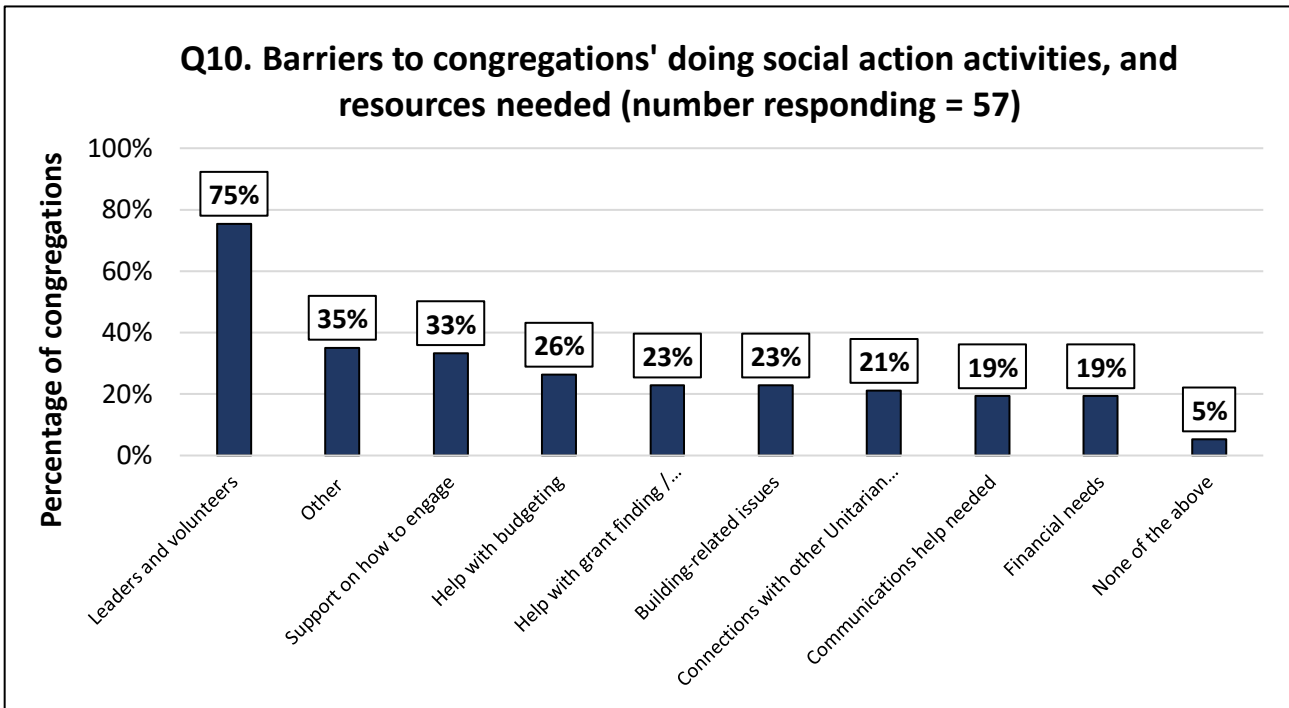
We asked congregations what assets they had to support action on social issues. As shown in the chart below, the 'top three' answers were:

1. Building = 88%
2. Active trustees or committee = 77%
3. Close to public transport = 75%

Barriers to congregations' doing social action activities, and resources needed

We asked congregations what the barriers to their doing social action activities were, and what resources they needed. As shown in the chart below, the 'top three' answers were:

1. People power = 75%
2. Other = 35%
3. Support on 'how to engage' = 33%
4. Help with budgeting, finding resources = 26%



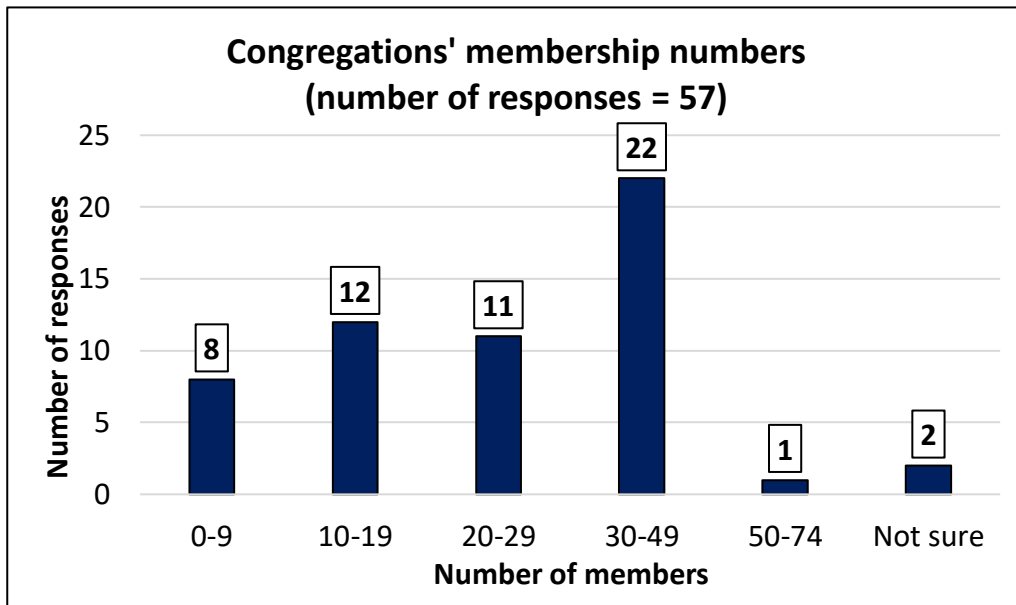
The vast majority of 'other' responses to this question fell into the category of congregations limited by age or health issues – broadly supporting the first category of 'leaders and volunteers'. Several groups commented that they don't take action as a congregation, but that members individually do. Two were limited by the lack of the building or by restrictions on the building due to listing (again, this could be categorised alongside 'building-related issues'), and one cited 'mindset, anxiety, and privilege' as a reason for holding back.

Focus group insights

"Our district mostly disperses and manages the funds of closed chapels. There's a newsletter/coordinator but it's difficult to resource. Other people in the District are rooted in the past, as if we're large active congregations, but actually many are closing and there's no energy to do more."

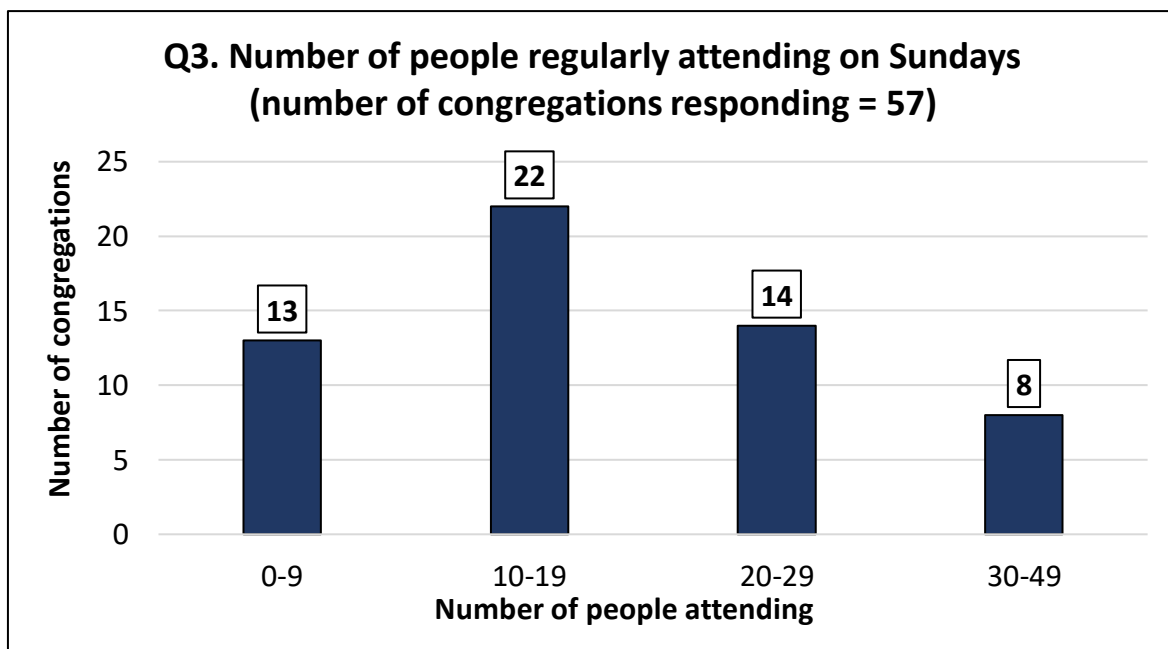
5. What is the congregation size?

The single largest number of congregations in the survey – 22 congregations – had between 30-49 members.



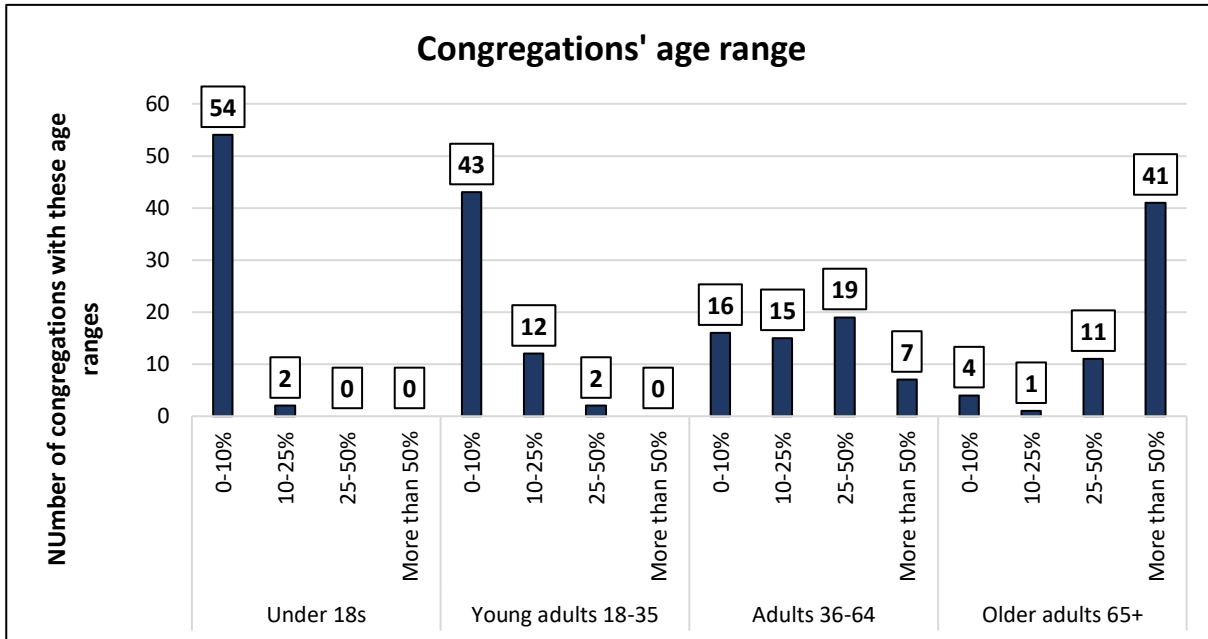
6. How many people regularly attend on Sundays?

The single largest number of congregations – 22 – had between 10-19 people regularly attending on Sundays.



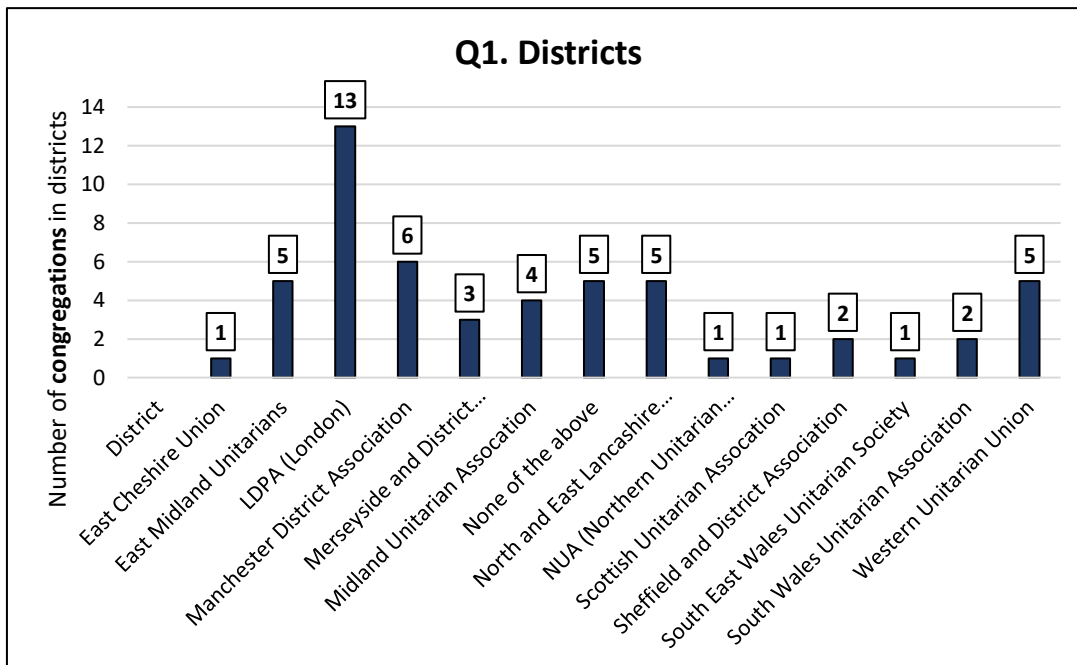
7. Congregation age

The single largest age group represented in the congregations' age ranges was people aged 65 and over – 41 of the 57 congregations had over 50% of their regular attenders in this age range.



8. Congregation location — districts

The single largest number of congregations – 13 – were from the London District and South Eastern Provincial Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (LDPA).

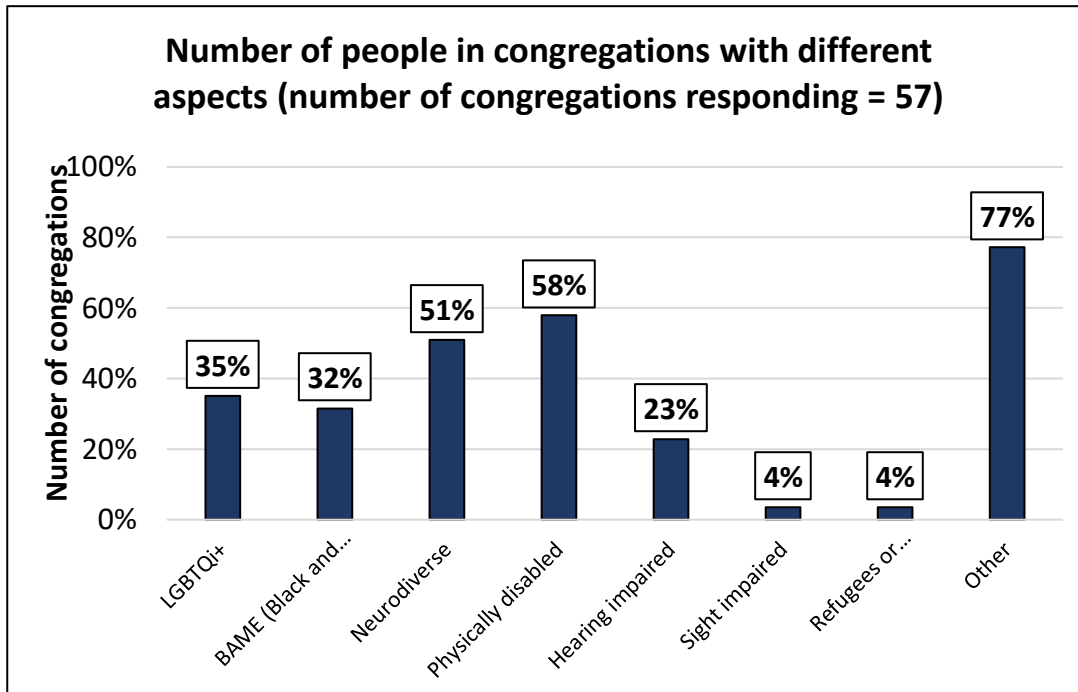


9. Congregation diversity

When asked about the diversity of their congregations, 79% (44 congregations) said that they had members who were hearing impaired. Over 71% (40 congregations) indicated that they had

members who were LGBTQi+. The next most common aspects of congregation members were 'being physically disabled' (66%) and 'being neurodiverse' (41%).

There were only a few comments in this area, with the only characteristic mentioned by more



than one group being dementia. One cited long-term health issues and another mental health difficulties, and one commented that its Zoom community might have a different demographic to the in-person community.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Bowland Trust for sponsoring this project. A big “thank you” to everyone who responded to the survey and especially those who took the extra time to participate in the focus groups. We had a very healthy response, which means that the data should be a good reflection of where our movement is regarding interest and capacity around current social issues. Of course, no survey can accurately reflect the nuances of individual motivation and involvement, so it will be the work of all of us to direct our collective efforts and encourage social leadership where we see it. We look forward to using this data to explore new and better ways to engage with social action in the UK Unitarian movement.

