

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

It is a fundamental part of the Christian vision to work for a world that is just.

The newly published "Hidden Needs" report from the Suffolk Community Foundation provides ample evidence that the county has not recovered following the 2008 recession, and deprivation across our county has become worse.

The recession, with the collapse of various financial institutions, hit Suffolk hard during 2008/2009, as it did the country and around the world.

But when we look at Suffolk's recovery from that blow, we see it was quite a bit slower than many other parts of the country.

And now we are being hit by a far greater economic calamity with the global pandemic, and what we are already seeing is the Suffolk economy lacks the resilience of many other areas, and it is going to be a huge challenge to recover.

There is no telling just how much worse it will be when we eventually start to count the cost of the pandemic.

The "Hidden Needs" report is clear that Suffolk is not one of England's most deprived counties, but it is becoming less advantaged, and more deprived.

That trend is visible both in the most deprived communities becoming more deprived during the past ten years, and in the less deprived communities across Suffolk where the number of families and individuals impacted by deprivation has increased.

In a county with a 760,000 population, 75,000 – so nearly 10% - according to the report, "experience income deprivation" which I understand to mean live in poverty. And that divides between 54,000 within our towns and 21,000 within our villages.

Of that number, 18,000 are children, 13% of all children in the county, who are living in poverty.

That includes, the report argues, developing a coordinated approach between all the groups that can make a difference – business, local government, and the voluntary sector – who at the moment are not as joined up in their aims and methods as they need to be.

But it also means for all of us with a vision of a better and more just society that we recognise the plight that so many in Suffolk face in their daily lives, and become advocates for them – making sure our politicians, business leaders and others in positions of influence know that we want life to be better for those in greatest need.

And this is not just a task for individuals, but for community groups and churches too – to become advocates for change for a better society for all.

The report goes on to identify three areas where deprivation is particularly marked and has been since 2007: Children's education, accessibility to services, and housing quality. and we all know these impact a range of communities, not just the most deprived.

The deeper issues that need to be addressed, particularly as we work hard to recover from the devastation of the pandemic, are identified in the report as high employment and decent income in all neighbourhoods, good health for all, affordable housing in good condition within rural Suffolk, good educational outcomes, and safe neighbourhoods for all.

This seems like a daunting list, we can feel like it is too big a challenge, and we just carry on with the sticking plaster remedies.

The outpouring of care and generosity through food banks and community care to make a difference for those in need right now, by Christians and non Christians alike right across Suffolk, is amazing.

But every single person who is involved in providing that care would say, wouldn't it be even more amazing if everyone had what they needed – income, housing, health, education – and no one was in the desperate situation that so many are facing now.

Most of us have come to see clearly just how valuable food banks and pop-up shops have become to many people in Suffolk during this pandemic.

Whether we have benefitted directly, or have family or friends who have, or are involved in providing these vital support services, we have seen the difference they make.

Community groups, churches and neighbourhood networks are making all the difference right now to those who need help meeting basic needs across our county.

And we have seen how important Government schemes have been to support businesses, including by helping staff keep their jobs through the furloughing initiative.

Even though many people have still lost their jobs, and businesses have collapsed.

But whether we are thinking of food banks or business support grants, these are still sticking plaster that don't address the underlying and longer term challenges we face in Suffolk, as well as across our nation.

So we will continue to need for some time – maybe for a very long time – local care and support for those most in need within our communities – the food banks and local community and neighbourly support filling the gaps for people that goes on often unseen – a hidden response to hidden needs.

But we also need to harness our resolve and determination to work toward that Christian vision of a just society, where there are no children in poverty, where meeting people's basic needs is assured, and everyone knows they are valued.