

Acting  
in **Good  
Faith**

A stylized tree where the branches are two hands reaching upwards. The leaves are various shades of blue and dark blue, scattered around the hands. The background is white on the left and a gradient of blue on the right.

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St Vincent de Paul  
**Maghera**

CASE STUDY

# Background

The Society of St Vincent de Paul is a lay organisation of the Catholic Church. St Vincent de Paul was founded in Paris in 1833 by a student Francis Ozanam and his friends. They were appalled at the poverty they encountered in the slums of Paris and the huge inequalities that existed in the city. They were motivated to take practical action to address poverty and were concerned that although the Catholic Church hierarchy at the time preached about the evils of poverty they didn't actually do anything about it.

The Society spread quickly and the first Conference in Ireland was founded in Enniskillen in 1848 at the time of the Famine. St Vincent de Paul groups are organised into conferences. St Lurach's Conference of St Vincent de Paul was founded in Maghera parish in County Derry in 1910.

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## Services St Vincent de Paul Provides

Like other St Vincent de Paul conferences volunteers collect donations and distribute help locally to people in need. Conference volunteers collect money outside Saturday vigil and Sunday Masses held in the two parish chapels. The Conference also receives one off donations from individuals and businesses at Christmas and throughout the year. They said:

*In this parish people are unfailingly generous and the work we do is very well supported.*

As a conference they meet every two weeks. They start with a prayer and then assess the requests received through the helpline. St Vincent de Paul operates in this area using a helpline system. It has a phone number, published in the church bulletin which is well known in the community which people call or text. People are called back within 24 hours and an arrangement is made to meet them to talk about their needs. The focus is on a practical approach to dealing with poverty, alleviating its effects on individuals and families through working primarily in person-to-person contact. People can self-refer or can be referred by a family member, a friend or a referral agency such as Surestart or by health visitors or social workers.

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Two key principles underpin the work. The first is confidentiality, which is very important to the Conference and to beneficiaries. The second principle is that no work of charity is foreign to the Society and it offers help and support to people of any faith, or none, who ask for it. An unwritten rule operates in this Conference that no-one, who asks for it, is refused help. Most of St Lurach's Conference resources are spent on food and basic household necessities. The Conference operates a voucher system which beneficiaries can use in the local supermarket to pay for groceries, fuel or electricity, to top-up mobile phones or for baby needs. St Lurach's Conference covers the parish of Maghera including the villages of Tobermore, Cullnady and surrounding rural communities, which is a big catchment area.

The Conference runs a toy appeal at Christmas where individuals and businesses donate new toys for distribution to families in need throughout the community. The Conference also distributes second hand furniture to households. Two retailers in the area pass on good quality second hand furniture to St Vincent de Paul which is given to households who need it. St Vincent de Paul can also supply new bedding and mattresses for households who are moving into unfurnished accommodation.



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It also supplies new white goods such as fridges, ovens and washing machines to households but are obviously limited in the number of households they can help in this way. This Conference has also helped the small migrant worker community, mostly Polish and Lithuanian families who moved here over the past 15 years. These families needed initial support with form filling, housing issues and advice on school enrolment for their children. Many of these families are now settled in the area and are valued members of the community.

St Vincent de Paul also help with rent or utility arrears and will, with the householder's permission, contact creditors to arrange to pay off some of the arrears.

Some of the funds the Conference raises goes to overseas aid. Approximately 2% of its closing annual balance is sent to its Headquarters and re-distributed to St Vincent de Paul Conferences in the developing world.



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## Links with other partner organisations in the area

Referrals come from a wide range of organisations and individuals across the community. The Conference gets referrals from district nurses and health visitors and this brings a lot of families into contact with the service. The local Surestart project also make referrals for families with young children. Social workers based in the community make referrals of older isolated people who are coming out of hospital after a period of illness and who need support. The Conference, although an independent organisation in its own right, sends some of the funds to St Vincent de Paul headquarters as its contribution to the Sharing Fund.

The Sharing Fund can be drawn on by any St Vincent de Paul Conference across Northern Ireland who is faced with an increase in requests for support that its unable to meet in the short term. Other St Vincent de Paul Conferences and the headquarters in Belfast will make referrals if they are contacted directly by people who live in the local catchment area.

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## How does St Vincent de Paul make a difference in the lives of people it works with?

On a day to day basis the Conference works with households in poverty to meet their basic needs of food and warmth. These can be families with children, people with disabilities, people who have lost their job, people who are waiting on a social security benefit decision or whose income has been interrupted as they switch to a different type of benefit. Increasingly the Conference is being approached by people who have a gap in their income as they move from Disability Living Allowance to Personal Independence Payment and have no money coming in at all for two or three weeks. In most cases they support people with a small donation to help them through a short-term crisis period.

The Conference also supports households to become established, which can be a big cost burden on families who are on a low income.

These can be young families who are being housed for the first time or maybe families who are relocating because of domestic violence issues and have had to leave everything behind them. Some of the comments left on their helpline by beneficiaries include:

*Thank you so much for your kind support, its very much appreciated during a very difficult time.*

*Thank you so much for your kindness and help. I appreciate this so much, God bless.*

*Thank you so much St Vincent de Paul is amazing. Keep up your great work.*

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## What are the key challenges the project faces?

The Conference has issued extra appeals for people at Christmas and when children are returning to school, times of the year when they know there are extra demands on poorer households. The Conference finds it more difficult to encourage rural families to use the services provided. Rural households could definitely benefit from the project but they appear to be more reluctant to come forward and ask for support. Family and neighbour networks may be more extensive in rural communities and that may partly explain why the Conference gets fewer requests from rural areas.

It has become increasingly difficult to provide fuel for beneficiaries over the last twenty years as solid fuel heating systems have been replaced by oil fired central heating. Previously the conference could easily provide several bags of coal to people who were having difficulty heating their homes. Now most oil suppliers have a minimum order of £150 and if the conference has 3 or 4 requests for heating oil in a week it becomes impossible to meet that demand from the funds being distributed.

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Social housing which is rented unfurnished provides a big challenge. For low income families setting up a new household with furniture and white goods is a massive outlay and it's impossible if they don't have a family network to help them out.

There are fewer avenues now for households in need to access money for bigger bills. Social Fund grants and loans have been abolished and advances on social security benefits can be difficult to get.

The Conference has seen an increase in debt levels and in households being forced to access high cost doorstep lenders and loan sharks. This is causing significant hardship to already hard-pressed households. It is increasingly difficult to meet the need that's out there so although no-one is turned away they don't get all they need and the Conference is unable to help everyone to the extent that it would like to.



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## Jane\*, a health visitor from Maghera speaks about her experience of St. Vincent de Paul?

### How does your organisation work with St Vincent de Paul?

*We would contact St Vincent de Paul if there is a need within the community or our client base for household goods, food or home heating oil for those families who can't afford basic essentials and are struggling.*

### What benefit does that bring to your organisation?

*There are not many other organisations we can go to that provide this support for families without being means tested - it is also a very quick service and deals with emergencies.*

### What is the impact of its work on clients you have referred to them?

*Clients are forever grateful to St Vincent de Paul for help as they may be at that stage where they feel they have no one to turn to and it gives them hope again and vision to see into the future.*

*\*Name has been changed.*

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**Rural Community Network**  
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