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NATIONAL NETWORK COULD SAVE DYING COMMUNITIES

Professor Paul Spicker, secretary of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities and vice chair of Dundee Hebrew Congregation, is worried about the future of shrinking communities throughout the UK. The Newcastle-born prof, director of the Centre for Public Policy and Management at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, moved to Scotland 18 years ago and lives with his wife Geraldine and children Chloe and Theo. These are his personal views on the future of UK Jewish communities

WHAT do we do when the people have gone? Imagine a country where perhaps one person in a thousand is Jewish, and there are only two or three places left where there is a viable community.

It is not hard to picture. This is what has happened in Scotland, and it is happening in the rest of Britain.

The Jewish population is ageing. Many of the younger people have moved away from the places where they were born.

If they are enthusiastic, they go to Israel, or at least to somewhere there is a Jewish community.

If they are unenthusiastic, Britain offers people a wide range of alternative lifestyles, and they are likely to build their lives around some of the other options.

But if people want to engage in Jewish life, and have to live or work somewhere where there is no community, what happens to them?

Anglo-Jewry has organised itself around a traditional idea of local communities. Every community is expected to fend for itself. The shul and community organisations depend on subscriptions from members.

Without a community, there is no Rabbi, no burial society, no common facilities, and no funds.

When there is no-one left to pay, the music has to stop. Shuls close, and communities have to relate to the nearest neighbouring communities.

This is already a problem for smaller communities, because the most enthusiastic people - the ones who are most likely to keep services and activities going are also the least likely to be ready to live miles away from the centre of their community; they are going to move out.

As the number of members drops, communities are disappearing. We are slowly coming to face a situation where there are large holes in the map - sizeable parts of Britain where there will be dispersed groups and no community facilities.

I live near St Andrews in Fife, and, by accident of history, my nearest shul is in Dundee, 15 miles away.

There was a thriving community in Dundee 50 years ago. Dundee Hebrew Congregation has inherited a shul and a cemetery, but after a long, slow decline, hardly anyone is left from the old community.

That does not stop new people coming to the area - there are three universities, a medical school and some important health industries - even if there are not enough to keep us going.

We have built up a small congregation - up to 30 souls, if we include the under fives - but most of us are transient.

We've had vital support from other institutions. The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities has bound together people from many outlying areas, keeping us in touch with other communities.

They run on a shoestring, and their minimal funding needs to be used mainly for their representative function rather than a support role.

We've had encouragement and teaching from the chaplain for small communities and Rabbi David Rose, from Edinburgh.

But we have almost no income, and we know the community is not sustainable. We keep going because, if we close the shul, there will be nothing in Eastern Scotland between Aberdeen and Edinburgh - well over 100 miles apart.

There is a more general lesson in this. We can't sustain Judaism in Britain on the basis of local private clubs, reserved for a dwindling number of settled, paid-up members.

It's time to rethink the way that community life is organised.

We need to think about a national network of support and contacts, and we need to pool funds.

That is the only way that people outside a handful of areas can both contribute to the wider community and hope to engage with the kind of activities that will keep them in contact with Jewish life.