

units of housing on the local parking situation. The development will include parking for nine vehicles.

Most opposition was due to misunderstanding, despite press releases and all the other ways the local church used to try to get the message over accurately.

Local Politicians

Excellent support was received from the local councillors from the outset. They lobbied planners and others on the church's behalf. They are key people to have on board with any scheme. Good support was also received from the local M.P, especially at the time when the church was in danger of being listed.

All the hurdles were overcome, but the process took some two years to complete. Not a job that can be rushed!

Social Responsibility Forum Discussion Papers

This is the fourth in a series of occasional papers that the Social Responsibility Forum (SRF) of Churches Together in Cumbria produces to stimulate discussion and action in the churches of our county focussed upon a variety of social issues. These papers are suitable for use in a house group, study group or discussion group or by the whole church.

Previous discussion papers focus on

1. The arms trade
2. Dialogue with people of other faiths
3. Churches engaging with the challenges of the Cumbrian economy

Further copies of all papers are available from:

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www.churchestogethercumbria.co.uk

Please feel free to photocopy these papers.



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Social Responsibility Forum

Discussion Paper
No. 4

**CHURCHES
TOGETHER
in CUMBRIA**

Churches Together
in Cumbria is part of
the national network
of Churches
Together in Britain
and Ireland

Housing to Meet Local Need: How Can Cumbria's Churches Meet the Challenge?

This discussion paper is designed to help your church to consider, together with the other local churches in your area, ways in which church-owned buildings that are no longer going to be used for worship or land that is no longer required by a church might be made available to meet local housing need.

The paper has been prepared by a task group of the Social Responsibility Forum, which looked at these issues in some detail, examining pitfalls and obstacles as well as exciting examples of work in this area. Our message to you is that it may not be easy but it is worth venturing into this area for:

Where there is a will there is usually a way.

Local Housing Need: The Problem

In many parts of Cumbria house prices are very high, while average incomes are low. In areas of the Lake District average house prices are ten times average household income. This makes it impossible for many low income families to either buy or rent in the places where they work and where they have grown up. There is a shortage of low cost housing to meet this local need.

How Can the Church Help?

Housing associations and other not-for-profit housing suppliers are looking for suitable land and buildings for new build or conversion to provide housing to meet local needs.

Sometimes local churches have land or buildings that are no longer appropriate to their present day requirements. They are looking to move to smaller purpose built premises or to share facilities with another denomination.

If your church or other churches in your community are in this position have you thought how these interests might be brought together so that the Church contributes housing possibilities to meet the needs of its local community? Mitre Housing Association is particularly engaged in this area of work, has a strong church connection and is a good first port of call for a church wishing to discuss the possibilities of making land or buildings available for this purpose.

There was an attempt to list the premises on the grounds that there were many Art Deco features in the building, such as the stained glass window and roof beams. This delayed progress whilst the government Department for Culture, Media and Sport sent their inspector to look at the building. The planners maintained that in order to fully appreciate the window the internal space must be preserved. Had the listing gone through there would have seemed to be little choice but to preserve the building in its present state. Fortunately the government department rejected the application on the grounds that whilst the outside showed promise the internal features did not match up to this.

However, it seemed that the planners continued to delay the process as much as possible and were very reluctant to see any change of use.

The agreement relating to local occupancy is also a planning matter and the production of this took many weeks after planning permission had been granted. Without this agreement the planning permission was worthless.

The Local Congregation

Once the vision had been explained there was a great deal of enthusiasm amongst the local congregation and they continue to be excited about the future.

Local Residents

There was very little formal resistance once people had realised that the church was not to be demolished, although there was some comment about the kind of people that would end up living in the accommodation!

Of those who objected, the majority seemed more concerned about the beautiful Japanese Maple trees in the grounds than they were about the building. These trees are to be preserved.

There was a genuine concern about the impact of fifteen extra

Ambleside Methodist Church. A Case Study:

The story that follows is as related by the Methodist minister.

The former church building of Ambleside Methodist Church has been sold to the 'Home' Housing Association. Home are South Lakeland District Council's (SLDC) preferred housing association for housing projects to meet local need.

The premises are being redeveloped to provide fifteen units of accommodation consisting of one and two bed apartments. The projected completion date is September 2006.

The Methodist congregation are relocating their activities to new purpose built premises which have been developed as a joint venture between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.

So what were some of the problems and solutions encountered along the way?

Charity Commissioners & the issue of Best Value

In this case it was the opinion of the valuer that the figure offered by Home Housing was the best available price in view of the position with regard to likely planning limitations on possible uses for these premises. In this respect being situated in the National Park was an advantage.

Lake District National Park Planning Authority & the question of Planning Permission

Home Housing encountered some considerable difficulty obtaining planning permission for this development. They stated an original intention to develop the site into 22 units but in the end had to settle for 15.

But What About Best Market Price?

The first thing to overcome in our desire to meet local housing need is the common but often incorrect notion that our church buildings can only be disposed of at the best possible market price.

Is the building subject to any sort of written Agreement, Trust, or Charitable Registration?

If **YES**, then the Objects of the Trust should be examined.

If the Objects specifically contain or include the provision of housing for any sector of the community in particular housing need then there will be no objection to disposing of the property for that purpose, either to some other charity with similar objectives, or direct to a developer such as a Housing Association, at less than market value. There will need to be careful provision in the sale transfer for the property to remain for the required purposes in perpetuity. Means of doing this are not specified here, as the options may vary over time with new legislation etc, but at any given time there will always be clear mechanisms.

If the Objects do not include such provision, then they should be even more carefully examined to see if the provision of housing for this special purpose can be interpreted as being legitimate within the Objects as written. For example, many charitable objects contain such phrases as "... relief of poverty ..." etc. There are many ways in which legal documents written many years ago can, with ingenuity, be interpreted to fit the needs of today. If the church is a registered charity the interpretation of the Charity Commission regarding the Objects may need to be considered.

If **NO**, there is no Trust Deed or other Agreement, then ask:

- Who has a controlling interest in the building? This may be local but is more frequently a central denominational property authority.
- Who has a legitimate, but not controlling interest? E.g. the congregation, wider church community, PCC etc. This is probably where the idea to use the building for these purposes originates. But look for other interest groups. Do not assume that the folk with the idea are the only folk who need to be consulted.

Resistance to Sale to Meet Local Housing Need?

There may be at least two distinct types of resistance to the idea:

1. From the local community, either:
 - Within the church in question, or
 - In the wider non-church community, perhaps on the NIMBY principle (“not in my backyard”).
2. From the central controlling property owning/managing branch of the denomination, or some local office-bearer, on the “must get best market price” principle.

Clearly these and any other potential areas of resistance will need to be identified and analysed, but it is important to consider that they will probably need to be dealt with very differently.

NIMBY-type views are widely held, but can be countered with care and sensitivity. They are usually the result of either misinformation, wrong assumptions or jumping to wrong conclusions. Phrases such as ‘social housing’ are sometimes unhelpful. The phrase ‘housing to meet local need’ is recommended as preferable.

The **central control** objections are often more complicated and more difficult to overcome. By definition, these objections emanate from people who have no direct understanding of local circumstances. Sometimes they are also people who have little feel for the problems of a largely rural and relatively remote county. Being in control of a large and valuable portfolio of property they naturally feel the need to protect the balance sheet, albeit that the balance sheet does not represent liquid asset. They often genuinely believe that they are under a legal obligation to obtain best market value, even if they cannot show any documentary evidence for that view. There will be several other issues on a case-by-case basis. Each issue must be identified and countered with well-constructed arguments backed up where possible by statistics and other evidence, as ‘hearsay’ and relatively subjective argument can more easily be dismissed as of no consequence. Patience is required! Identify all the issues with care; don’t dismiss any of them as being too silly or too difficult to deal with; construct your arguments to counter each issue, using as much concrete evidence as possible.

Planning Permission

Look at the following issues before you talk to the local planning authority:

- Read and understand the provisions for housing to meet local need (often called ‘affordable housing’) in the Regional Spatial Strategy for the Northwest (formerly known as Regional Planning Guidance), the Cumbria and Lake District Joint Structure Plan, and any more local strategic planning documentation in your area.
- You may have to depend on special provision in these local planning documents for dealing with housing to meet local need.
- It will be necessary to demonstrate need. This cannot be casually demonstrated. Most local authorities will have a good idea of need for the District as a whole, but it may be necessary to carry out a special Housing Needs Survey for the specific location. Such surveys are usually undertaken either by the local authority itself or by an independent organisation whose findings are accepted by the planning authority. For example, in rural locations in Cumbria housing needs surveys are carried out by a totally independent organisation known as Cumbria Rural Housing Trust.
- Is your building listed or in a Conservation Area? This will affect what changes can be made to it. If it is listed you will have to make a second application for Listed Building Consent as well as the Planning Application.

Persistence

Don’t be discouraged! If the local Church in your area has identified a potential site or building to help address the shortage of housing for local need, engage with the advice and ideas above, talk in-depth with each other about the possibilities, talk to those who have been down this road before you, and remember:

Where there is a will there is usually a way.