

OUR COMMON HERITAGE

Housing associations and churches working together

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By Tim Thorlby & Alison Gelder



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**THEOLOGY
& COMMUNITY**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 - INTRODUCTION

Housing associations in the UK now manage two and a half million homes for more than five million people. These private not-for-profit organisations provide social housing in almost every community.

Churches, likewise, are present in every community in the UK. With five and a half million members across all denominations, they represent the largest grassroots community network in the UK, actively serving their local communities in many ways.

In a speech to the National Housing Federation in 2013, the Archbishop of Canterbury challenged housing associations and churches to work more closely together, as partners in regeneration. He cited their ‘common heritage’.

In this report we explore the partnerships which housing associations and local churches have already established and we highlight examples of good practice. We also look to the future and suggest how these partnerships could – and should - be strengthened, for the common good.

This report has been prepared by the Centre for Theology & Community and Housing Justice, based on a range of evidence and discussions. We are grateful to Chapter 1 and the Quaker Housing Trust for funding the research and for giving the authors independence in our editing of the report.

2 - OUR COMMON HERITAGE

The Housing association sector of today owes much to the work of churches in past years. Understanding this legacy is important for understanding the relevance that such a partnership still has today.

The history of the housing association sector has been one of fits and starts over a century and a half. From the ‘model dwelling movement’ of the mid nineteenth century to the voluntary housing societies of the 1920s to the rapid growth of the modern housing association sector from the 1970s, the sector has not had an easy ride. It was written off several times by eminent commentators. Yet today it houses over five million people.

And what of the Church’s role? From the historical record there can be little doubt that the Church and its members (meaning churches of all denominations) have played an important role in energising, funding and shaping the voluntary housing sector. In past centuries the Church

was almost the only institution capable of providing a welfare service. Since the 19th Century it has increasingly shared that role with others, particularly with the growth of state provision in the 20th Century, but it has continued to play an important role. Many of the voluntary housing societies, formed in waves through the 19th and 20th Centuries, have been led and supported by people motivated by their faith to address the visible poverty and need around them.

The significance of the Church's role has never been in the scale of its provision though. Even in the heyday of the Victorian social pioneers the amount of housing refurbished or built was never large. Its significance lies more in its ability to highlight new problems and shape the agendas of Government. The Church's role has been to highlight social problems, demanding an answer and pointing the way to solutions. The Church was able to play this role because it was part of those deprived communities – present and engaged – and therefore more fully aware of the reality of poverty than many others at the time.

The significance of the Church's actions is also found in the solutions proposed. Octavia Hill (and others) devised an approach to housing which was profoundly respectful of the value of the people they sought to help – mutual and relational in its approach, in a way which seems quite at odds with some of the large-scale provision of housing today.

In the second decade of the 21st Century, the world has obviously moved on. Today's housing challenges are different, and the role of the Church in the UK has changed. Yet we contend that the Church still has an important role to play in housing, drawing on the inspiration of previous generations. It remains by far the largest grassroots community organisation in the country. Many of its members are actively involved in meeting social and economic needs. For example, a national survey of Anglican churches found that over 90% were delivering at least one project to meet local social need¹ - and other denominations will add to this.

The Church remains deeply embedded in our poorest communities and is still able to play an innovative social role in helping to highlight welfare gaps and social issues that the mainstream has yet to address, and helping to provide services which fill those gaps – for the benefit of all.

¹ Eckley, B. & Sefton, T. (2015) *Church in Action: A national survey of church-based social action*, Church Urban Fund and The Church of England

3 - TODAY'S HOUSING CHALLENGES

The last few decades - across much of the UK - have seen a trend of rising house prices, rising rents and a growing problem of housing affordability. From 2000 to 2010, average house prices in England almost doubled. Underlying this has been a sustained gap between the growing demand for housing (as the number of households in the UK has continued to rise) and a historically low level of new house-building.

Most commentators agree that finding a way to build more homes each year is a national priority and the only long term solution to managing the inflation of house prices and rents. There is heated debate about which solutions will work, but radical change to how the land and housing market operates is clearly required. There is a real human cost to our housing problems. The nation also has some long-term demographic trends to contend with, particularly an ageing population, as well as a need for reform in both our social and private rented housing sectors.

The Agenda for Housing Associations

Within this overall challenge, the housing association sector is facing its own strategic challenges as it seeks to make its contribution:

- Insufficient new homes are being built
- Welfare reforms are increasing the risk of rental arrears
- 'Supporting People' funding has reduced
- Concerns about climate change imply more investment will be needed to improve energy efficiency
- Housing associations have the challenge of how to provide more than just housing for their tenants
- How can housing associations be accountable to their local communities? How can the historic values of voluntarism be protected?
- How can associations better address the wider faith and spiritual needs of their tenants/service users?

The Agenda for Churches

These national housing challenges are a key issue for churches too – not just because their members are affected as individual citizens, but

because land and housing are key issues in Christian social thought.

At the heart of Christian social ethics – and of Christian engagement in campaigns for a Living Wage and against exploitative lending (usury) is a vision of each human being as having unique dignity as a child of God. We are not *commodities* and Christianity stands against *commodification* more generally. Homes and neighbourhoods are more than simply assets to be traded. They are gifts from God, and they also have a significance which is bound up with the story and history of the people who live in them. At the heart of the Bible and of Christian Social Teaching is this question: How do our material relationships and our economic exchanges help us to grow in communion with God and neighbour?

Of course, the Church cannot speak out on this or any other issue without putting its own house in order. If churches are to call for others to make housing a priority, they will have to consider how they steward their property – and how congregations might offer practical support to housing associations.

Who is my Neighbour? (the Pastoral Letter issued by the Church of England's Bishops in advance of the 2015 General Election) reminds us of another reason the Church should be keen to partner with organisations such as credit unions and housing associations, rather than simply campaigning for changes in Government policy. These institutions of civil society have an intrinsic value – “they, rather than the market and state, are the building-blocks of true community,...small enough not to need every activity to be codified, through which we can learn to work together in trust, not just according to rules.”²

4 - PARTNERSHIP WORKING TODAY

In this section we identify the ways in which churches and housing associations are already working together. We also present three in-depth case studies of churches working with housing associations in different ways.

Experience suggests that churches (of all denominations) can work closely with housing associations (both secular and otherwise) and do so quite happily and effectively. Indeed, this is the primary challenge and the opportunity. The different ways in which partnership working

² Church of England, (2015) *Who is my neighbour? A Letter from the House of Bishops to the People and Parishes of the Church of England for the General Election 2015*



already occurs include the following:

1 Church land for social housing - Many churches are seeking to make better use of their land through a mixture of disposal, consolidation and redevelopment. For housing associations, working with churches can lead to new land being identified for social housing. For churches, such arrangements not only help to fulfil part of their social mission, but can also provide capital and/or revenue income.

2 Volunteer involvement - Another common route for church engagement is through volunteering. Churches often provide groups of volunteers to support social housing tenants, particularly the most vulnerable, in practical ways.

3 Meeting spiritual needs - There is some existing work to support the spiritual needs of social housing tenants and those who are homeless. A recent Lemos & Crane report has encouraged secular homelessness agencies to begin thinking about and providing for the spiritual needs of their clients.

4 Political support on housing issues - Churches have a long history of campaigning and lobbying on social issues, including homelessness. Housing Justice has provided a national Christian voice on housing and homelessness for many years. More recently, Citizens UK and its member institutions have also been campaigning on local issues, which sometimes include housing issues. The subject of grassroots political campaigning on housing issues may not be familiar territory for many housing associations, but there is a confluence of interest between the sector and the campaigning agenda of many churches. Our research interviews suggested a clear interest amongst some associations in exploring this further.

5 Specialist housing provision for missional workers and retired clergy - Churches, as with many institutions, also have their own housing requirements – e.g. affordable retirement housing for clergy, or housing for key workers (especially in London). This may be an area where housing associations could help.

6 Social investment in housing - Finally, several recent initiatives have demonstrated the potential of social investment for tackling housing challenges. Housing associations may be able to work with churches on this. Examples include Green Pastures providing housing for the homeless and the *London Missional Housing Bond*,

raising social investment to provide affordable rented homes for church 'key workers' in deprived areas of London. These projects illustrate the potential of 'crowd funding' social investment from communities which are prepared to address local housing issues with their own money.

To illustrate some of these examples in greater depth, we have researched and presented three case studies:

● ***Case study 1 – Faith in Affordable Housing***

In this case study, we see how Housing Justice's national 'Faith in Affordable Housing' project facilitated the redevelopment of a parcel of church land in Gloucester by Rooftop Housing Group for mutual benefit, providing new social housing and a modern vicarage.

● ***Case study 2 – Chaplaincy and local partnerships***

This case study highlights how one association, Chapter 1, has taken a strategic approach to encouraging local partnerships with churches across its numerous services. The aim is to encourage volunteering as well as to enhance the provision of local chaplaincy services. The whole approach is led by a national chaplain which is itself an innovation.

● ***Case study 3 – Relational housing management***

In this final case study, local churches in Buckingham have helped to secure new social housing (on a small-scale) and provided volunteers to support tenants, and it highlights a very relational approach to housing management.

5 - MAKING IT WORK

Housing associations and churches already successfully work in partnership in numerous different ways, for mutual benefit. It is clearly possible. Nevertheless, such partnerships are not the norm. In our research we explored some of the perceived barriers.

A common theme in our discussions with both churches and housing associations was how little they actually knew about each other. In such a situation, anxieties about joint working are only natural.

In relation to developing church land for social housing, the evidence shows that this can be mutually beneficial. It may be possible to speed the identification of sites appropriate for development by closer working between church structures and housing associations, and churches could certainly take a more pro-active and strategic approach to this. Where land for housing is scarce, church land can be particularly useful

to housing associations. As churches and housing associations make decisions rather differently, it is also important to communicate well and clarify expectations and timetables from an early stage in any project.

In relation to projects supporting social housing tenants, our research suggested that housing associations were very interested in this, but largely unaware of the activities that churches can offer. Hopefully, the case studies and examples in this report will help to address this. Experience shows that volunteering can provide a lot of benefits, but also that it requires management in itself. There may well be a case for a shared resource to help promote volunteering of this nature between churches and housing associations.

There are also often concerns amongst housing associations that involvement with churches, or any faith-based organisation, is either risky or in some way ‘not allowed.’ Common fears include volunteers using the opportunity to proselytise or a concern that working with a church would be discriminatory in some way. There is much evidence from church-based and church-linked social action projects to show that these fears and anxieties are generally misplaced and that workable partnership arrangements are usually possible. There is some work to do in tackling ‘myths’ amongst housing association staff at all levels.

In short, there are many opportunities for further partnership working. With greater awareness of the possibilities and good communication and the management of expectations more of this potential could be realised.

6 - CONCLUSIONS: WHERE NEXT?

Churches and housing associations do indeed have a common heritage. They also share a common interest in tackling today’s very real housing challenges.

The success of churches’ co-operation with religious and civic groups in Citizens UK, and with the credit union movement shows the potential for a broad-based alliance to tackle Britain’s housing crisis. When we see how much has been achieved on these other issues – winning a Living Wage for millions of low-paid workers, expanding the mutual lending sector, and securing a cap on interest rates – we catch a glimpse of what we might do *together* to tackle Britain’s housing crisis.

As this report shows, churches and housing associations each have

a crucial role to play in making that happen. It highlights a number of ways in which they already work together which could be replicated more widely. How do we make this happen?

- **Co-operation needs to be a top priority, not an afterthought**

There is a need for the leaders of churches and the housing association sector to develop a stronger mutual understanding – at national, regional and sub-regional levels. A more strategic approach to the relationship would speed the development of joint working.

- **We need to be clear about what holds us back – and tackle it head-on**

Both housing associations and churches need to raise internal knowledge and awareness of the possibilities of co-operation, and overcome the ‘myths’ that hold people back.

- **Churches need to see this as a central priority in their work for the Common Good**

The housing crisis presents a fundamental threat to the shape of our communities and cities. Unless we act now, it may be too late – and the poorest will be pushed to the geographical margins. We need to build on the success of campaigns for a Living Wage and responsible lending, otherwise they will be undermined by these developments.

As well as scaling up the good practice we have described in our case studies, this will involve some new, strategic developments:

- Churches and housing associations need to **work together to build political support for social housing**. Community

Organising can play an important part in this process – building on the involvement of churches, charities (e.g. Housing Justice and Quaker Social Action) and tenants’ associations in Citizens UK.

- Local people and housing developments can be linked back together through more **community-based social investment**.

- **Social housing needs to be managed in a more relational way** – better balancing the commercial considerations with the needs and voices of local people.

We would like to thank **Chapter 1** and the **Quaker Housing Trust** who kindly funded this research project and made it possible.



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one by one

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