

Notes of the Tower Hamlets Deanery Synod – 11 February 2016

7pm at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine.

Attended by 11 clergy, 15 laity, 15 parish guests and 4 speakers.

Prayer led by Alexandra Lillie. The meeting was chaired by Jane Hodges.

1. Welcome

Andy opened the meeting and welcomed those present. Andy confirmed the outcome of the recent election of Marcus Nodder to the London Diocesan Synod and that of Trevor Critchlow as the representative of the London Diocesan Board for Schools. Andy also spoke of the clergy vacancies at St Nicholas, St Paul Shadwell and Queen Mary University. Andy then handed over to Jane Hodges.

Jane spoke of the current housing crisis and the particular problems experienced in Tower Hamlets, namely escalating property prices, council waiting lists and unsecure private rented accommodation. Access to safe, secure housing is a basic human right. Given the wave of high density housing developments who will be able to live in these new builds? Jane welcomed the speakers and read short biographies of each. Alastair was the first to take the floor.

2. Brief Theology of Housing and a Practical Response for Churches - Alastair Murray of Housing Justice

Alastair opened by stating that property ownership and lending/borrowing are mentioned in the Bible and, as such, can be taken as being important to God. How we respond to these things will demonstrate our relationship to Him. Leviticus 25 lays out perhaps the first housing policy. All property is received as a gift from God and therefore no person can truly own land. How we treat the poor in relation to this is also important as He is the God of Justice. Alastair referenced a paper on the Methodist website which provides valuable reading – [More than Bricks and Mortar](#).

Alastair reminded us that Jesus was born into a refugee family and mentioned Ecclesiastes (foxes in holes) and passages from Acts (widows and orphans). The Church therefore has a mandate to care for people in need. This was historically carried out by monasteries, which were the original Welfare State. The Dissolution of the Monasteries was a disaster for those people in need and eventually the Poor Laws evolved and were devolved to the parishes to administer.

Alastair went on to speak about the post 1945 Welfare State and the founding of [The Simon Community](#), [St Mungo's](#), [Centrepoin](#)t and [Shelter](#), all of which had involvement from Church leaders. Every London borough has at least one nightshelter organised by churches. Alastair spoke of his own organisation – [Housing Justice](#) - and the many people are campaigning to shape housing policy and for the rights of homeless people to be housed. Where is the voice of the Church today? Alastair pointed to Rev Paul Nicolson, Fr Martin Newell, Archbishop Justin Welby and Bishop James Langstaff who sits in the Lords. All of these are doing good work but are we radical enough in speaking out?

Although not mentioned in the presentation, Alastair asked that a publication by justspace.org.uk be mentioned in the minutes for further reading – [Towards a Community-Led Plan for London](#).

3. A View from a Developer and Social Landlord - Neal Hunt of Poplar HARCA

Neal set the scene by talking about the changes that have taken place over the last six years and the seismic effects they have had on social housing. Back then capital grants were available to build houses and rents could be kept low. £90k was available for each new home and the house paid for itself over 30 years. Now the grant has been reduced to £20k per home, the rest has to be found from the rent stream.

Social rents were then 40% of market rents. Now 'affordable' rents are anything up to 80% of market rents. Affordable rents in Tower Hamlets are simply not viable for most ordinary people.

Neal noted that when the coalition was in place many of the more aggressive housing policies were tempered. A ten year rent settlement was agreed (CPI + 1%) which provided a secure income enabling housing associations to approach banks for loans. The surprise victory of the Conservatives last year meant that policies that had been put together to please voters were now thrust upon the housing association without any detail. The following issues are to be considered:

- The rent agreement was torn up. Rents were now to decrease (CPI -1%) year on year. This lessened the burden of housing benefit for the government but costs Poplar HARCA many millions of pounds. The HARCA's development programme is stalling and community and youth services have to be cut.
- The proposed Housing and Planning Act allows starter homes to be considered Section 106. Home ownership is more attractive to the government rather than affordable rents.
- There has been an extension of Right to Buy scheme to housing association tenants meaning the housing stock of rented homes is getting lower.
- The government announced £140m spending on the 100 worst estates, ie £1.4m per estate. The leaseholder buyback on the Aberfeldy Estate alone will cost HARCA £23m.
- Changes to the tax and stamp duty charges on house purchases together with a safe legal framework means property in London is an attractive investment place for foreigners.

The Mayor of London estimates that 50,000 new homes a year are needed. Currently only 20,000 are being produced. Tower Hamlets is attractive because there is available land. 10,000 new homes will be built here in the next ten years. The question is, however, who these new properties are for and how do we keep affordable housing going.

4. A View from the Council – Cllr Rachel Blake – Tower Hamlets Cabinet Member

Rachel spoke about the demand for housing in Tower Hamlets. 20,000 are on the waiting list, half of which are considered to be in need (either homeless or in crowded accommodation). Single people tend to have no priority needs (dependents or health issues) and as such their chances of being housed are low. 2,000 people are currently in temporary accommodation, half of them outside the borough, which is damaging to communities.

The London Plan requires 4,000 new units to be built in Tower Hamlets every year. 35-50% of these should be affordable (some social rent, some affordable rent and some shared ownership). However, because of the level private rents (some £500-750 per square foot) these new homes are not affordable for those on the average wage. So, again, the question is asked – who are they for?

Rachel spoke of the council homes levy which forces councils to sell high value housing stock. It is estimated this would mean a loss of some £8m in rental income annually with no guarantee that these monies would be re-invested locally.

The council are committed to creating communities in Tower Hamlets. Homes are being built on seven sites (hundreds not thousands), some funding is being used to run a grant programme for housing associations, research is being done on affordability and a housing zone has been identified in the east of the borough.

Rachel finished by telling people what they can do to make a difference, namely writing to the House of Lords, signposting people to housing advice surgeries and telling local councillors the importance of building homes.

5. Questions and Answers

- a. Q: When Canary Wharf was built local boroughs were promised the business rates. This never happened. How can we ensure we benefit from new developments? A: The focus will perhaps be objection to the proposed housing and planning bill which is set to impose a council home levy as well as end secure tenancies and introduce Pay to Stay.
- b. Q: How can we prevent family homes being carved up by developers? A: It is difficult. 3/4 bedroom homes are let on the basis of 3/4 working people renting rather than one family.
- c. Q: What is Pay to Stay? A: Households in council homes earning more than £40k are forced to pay market rents or move out if they cannot exercise their right to buy. Largely unfair as it is based on the total household income rather than an individuals, plus it is difficult to implement and divisive. It could be seen as a tax on aspiration.
- d. Q: How many properties are empty in Tower Hamlets? A: Don't know but will find out.
- e. Q: Is Section 106 being terminated? A: It is still alive, but the focus is now on starter homes rather than affordable rental property. Agreements are renegotiated depending on 'viability' and developers tend to have good lawyers who can argue against viability. The appeal process is costly. Developers sometimes present two different sets of figures – one to local councils and a more attractive set to investors.
- f. Q: What exactly is the Community infrastructure Levy? A: It is a development tax to pay for schools/bridges, etc. Councils have to publish their rates so that developers know. The rates are set and non-negotiable.
- g. Q: Can the threat of starter homes be used to our advantage? A: By and large these are not affordable. The one off discount could be replaced by a longer term subsidy and these should be included in a wider suite of housing policies.

6. Building Something Better – Sarah Hutt of the Centre for Theology and Community (CTC)

Sarah reported that CTC have been working on how churches can respond to the housing crisis and referenced the Tim Thorlby Report – [Our Common Heritage: Churches and Housing Associations Working Together](#). Sarah noted that it is important not to ignore the human aspect of the crisis by focussing purely on economics and politics. To this end the CTC has carried out a great many conversations with ordinary people about how the crisis affects them. Sarah asked those present to consider the following:

- a. How is the housing crisis affecting you and your neighbours?
- b. How is the housing crisis affecting relationships in your community?

Sarah noted that good policy facilitates human relationships whereas bad policy destroys them and that relationships are important in God's eyes. In the Bible, home is the language of salvation and redemption (My Father's house has many rooms), so the sense of place is key.

The Mayor of London and London Assembly elections take place in May and Sarah urged those present to use their vote. Sarah advised that there is a [Mayoral Accountability Assembly](#) specifically on housing on Thursday 28th April 2016 at the Copper Box Arena and urged those present to attend. The call is for the next Mayor of London to support a London Living Rent, a Rogue Landlords Taskforce and a Good Homes Charter.

7. Conclusion

Jane circulated hard copies of the following questions and those present formed groups to discuss:

- One thing I've learned
- One thing I'll hold in prayer
- One thing we'll do

Actions

1. The proposed Housing and Planning Bill will have its second hearing shortly and it was unanimously agreed that the Area Dean on behalf of the Deanery Synod would write to the 26 bishops who sit in the House of Lords, encouraging them to speak against it for the reasons discussed in our meeting.
2. It was also unanimously agreed that as a Synod we would seek to support the CTC/Citizens Assembly event at the Copper Box on 28 April where housing will be a key conversation with the London Mayoral nominees.
3. Jane asked for anyone who wants to get more involved in housing issues to leave their names and contact details.

Andy thanked Rev Mark Aitken the Master and the RFSK team for hosting the event and Jane, Alexandra and Elizabeth for arranging the evening. The speakers were thanked. Andy also thanked the non-Synod members for their attendance.

Compline was led by Alexandra.

The next Synod – Thursday 23 June 2015 at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine