

# Scottish Churches Housing Action



no room for homelessness!

## CHURCH PROPERTY & HOUSING PROGRAMME – PILOT EVALUATION

**In September 2005, Scottish Churches Housing Action established a two-year pilot programme to assess the potential for churches to make property – buildings or land – available for the development of affordable housing. This paper summarises the outcomes.**



Duke St United Reformed Church, Leith

### Why church property ?

Churches have more buildings than we need – the result of, among other things, declining numbers and a process of unions.

Churches have many buildings which are nearer to being a liability than an asset – too big for present-day congregations, hard to heat, demanding large sums for repair and maintenance.

Churches have land which may be of greater value than the use to which it is presently being put.

A concentration on managing these problems is widely talked of as a distraction from the church's key task – to bring people into the community of Christ, and sustain them in their faith. "We spend more time and money on our building than we do on our people" – words like that are common in today's church.

Those with property responsibilities are increasingly looking for new solutions. Those with mission responsibilities need buildings that are better suited to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Why affordable housing?

Since 1994, Scottish Churches Housing Action has brought together the Scottish churches in their commitment to ending homelessness. One key response to the ongoing crisis of people without a home, is to provide affordable housing, for rent and for low-cost sale.

Yet housing associations, whose job it is to deliver such homes, are crying out for development opportunities. They have to compete with developers with deep pockets, in finding land to build homes, often in over-heated markets.

The churches, with a Biblical and historic commitment to the poor and marginalised, have an opportunity not to be missed: to put their resources of surplus property to use for affordable housing.

**Combining affordable housing with new church worship centres, far from costing the churches, can provide a means of bringing investment into renewing our buildings, and simultaneously making a major benefit to our communities.**

## METHODOLOGY

The Church Property & Housing Programme undertook four areas of activity in its pilot phase from September 2005 to August 2007:

- ❖ Establishing a database of examples of church property already used for affordable housing, and of sites presenting opportunity for future development
- ❖ Preparing the handbook, *Make It Happen*, as a guide to people in the churches considering this approach
- ❖ Promoting the approach through a series of presentations and talks to key people and committees across the denominations
- ❖ Holding a major Make It Happen conference in Glasgow in June 2007, which highlighted successes and further opportunities but also considered some barriers to this approach.



## FINDINGS & ACHIEVEMENTS

- ❖ By the end of August 2007, the number of sites on the programme's databases totalled **117**. This had grown from an original list of 57 projects, 11 of which had development potential.
- ❖ **51** of these were buildings or land with potential for development, at various stages from initial enquiry to in progress; the remainder had either already been developed as affordable housing (**48**), or had been considered and had not proceeded (**18**).
- ❖ These entries cover **23** of Scotland's 32 local authority areas, **10** different denominations and **34** housing associations.
- ❖ Over **400** affordable homes have already been provided from surplus church properties, helping around **1,100** people into good quality affordable homes. 6 projects are currently progressing towards providing, at a conservative estimate, at least another 70 affordable homes.
- ❖ In the last 10 years, **21** developments have attracted investment of around **£22.5million**.
- ❖ In each of the next 10 years at least **50** affordable homes could be provided, attracting capital investment, in the houses and related community regeneration, of over £35million.
- ❖ Some denominations, notably the **United Reformed Church** and the **Methodist Church**, are actively committed to considering the approach for surplus properties. The **Bishop of Galloway** has decided to work with Churches Housing in considering the future of all surplus properties in the Diocese.
- ❖ The main reason for projects not proceeding for affordable housing is that properties have been **sold on the open market**.
- ❖ Information, advice and varying levels of support were provided to people in **55** churches.
- ❖ This hands-on support, including project management, has helped **14** churches to test whether an affordable housing development option is feasible and viable.

## CONCLUSIONS

There has been considerable interest and support for the pilot approach across the denominations; from people in churches, housing associations, local authorities, private housing developers and others. The Scottish Government and MSPs have also been supportive – crucial since they are the ultimate providers of capital and infrastructure money for affordable housing investment.



Strathbungo former Church of Scotland, Glasgow

This has been a highly successful pilot that has met and exceeded its objectives. There have been several successful outcomes outwith the original objectives. These include:

- ❖ partnership working with the City of Edinburgh Council to identify the contribution to be made by churches to the local housing strategy
- ❖ consideration of the potential of glebe land for affordable housing development
- ❖ securing advice from the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator on the issue of the value to be achieved when a charity realises a capital asset
- ❖ the provision of hands-on support and project management for individual churches.

Churches Housing can now say, with a high degree of confidence, that there is significant potential, across the length and breadth of Scotland, for the churches to make an important contribution to addressing the shortage of affordable homes.

There is evidence of genuine interest from congregations about offering solutions for the churches and delivering affordable homes where they are needed in cities, small towns and rural areas. Publicity about the approach directly resulted in enquiries about new potential projects.

This work has had a definite impact in raising awareness of the affordable housing option to those with responsibility for church property.

We have learned lessons about the potential for Churches Housing to provide hands-on support and project management to congregations. This

helps them consider the affordable housing option realistically and, where appropriate, to take it forward – offering a positive outcome for the churches and the communities of which they are a part.

**The pilot has established a strong foundation for Scottish Churches Housing Action to deliver an ongoing Churches Property & Housing Programme as outlined overleaf.**

### THE WIDER PICTURE

The work of the Church Property & Housing Programme fits well with the Scottish Government's five strategic objectives for Scotland:

**...a wealthier and fairer Scotland** The programme promotes social inclusion.

**...a healthier Scotland** Decent, affordable housing is essential for healthy lives.

**...a safer and stronger Scotland** Registered social landlords are committed to safety and security.

**...a smarter Scotland** Decent housing combats educational disadvantage.

**...and a greener Scotland** Re-use of buildings is an effective way of developing new affordable homes.

## THE FUTURE

The Board of Scottish Churches Housing Action considered this evaluation at its meeting in December 2007. It has decided that the work of the Churches Property & Housing Programme should continue, based on the successful outcomes of the pilot. The next phase will see a change in emphasis – from documenting achievements and potential, to taking a ‘hands-on’ approach.

The project manager will now work principally through assisting churches to release the potential of particular sites. She will work alongside congregations and those with property responsibilities, supporting working groups, making links with planners, housing associations and others, and building up viable financial packages.

To make a success of this approach, we shall build on the pilot, and need to enlist the help and co-operation of others.

**More than anything else, we seek a strengthened commitment to the approach by all denominations. With this, we could see up to 100 affordable homes being provided annually, attracting capital investment of up to £50million and helping up to 1,500 people have secure, affordable homes in safe, secure and attractive communities.**



Churches Housing is promoting a concept of **best consideration** rather than highest value in disposing of assets. Advice from the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) indicates that there is greater flexibility in this than some have previously thought. This would take into account the needs of local churches and communities on important social issues such as affordable housing.

The **partnership** model developed with the City of Edinburgh Council will be actively promoted to other local authorities, in line with the promotion of the programme.

The pilot on the use of **glebe land** for affordable housing will be developed and lessons learned applied elsewhere, if appropriate.

**Churches benefit from the approach of the Churches Property & Housing Programme. It helps find solutions that address serious property problems; offers opportunities for new church centres; and frees up people’s time and energy to focus on a regenerated church with a fresh vision of mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

Further information about the **Church Property & Housing Programme**, and copies of the full evaluation report, are available from:

**Catherine Killin, Project Manager, Scottish Churches Housing Action**

**28 Albany Street EDINBURGH EH1 3QH; ☎ 0131 477 4500; ✉ [info@churches-housing.org](mailto:info@churches-housing.org)**

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