



THE CHURCH AND NEW COMMUNITIES (2015)

by

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This guide has been prepared by the Ecumenical Mission in New Communities Group in the East of England comprising the Methodist Church (Beds, Essex and Herts and East Anglia Districts), United Reformed Church (Eastern and Thames North Synods), Diocese of St Albans and Eastern and Central Baptist Associations.

Introduction

All across the six counties of the East of England new communities are being planned and under construction to meet the need for housing. In villages, towns and cities new developments are under way, sometimes consisting of thousands of new dwellings or in many cases just a handful. Whilst many people acknowledge the need for new homes for the young, for workers and for the homeless, large new communities are not universally popular. Whilst this guide has been prepared with the larger developments of 3000+ homes in mind, some of the principles can be applied to all new housing areas.

So how can the Church respond to the changes that are already in process?

1. Find out what is planned

Rumours spread quickly but are not always accurate. The local newspaper or radio station will often hear of intended development and broadcast the news as carefully as the current facts permit. This information can be checked with the District, City or County Council by telephoning the Planning Department or looking at the relevant website. Each local authority has to prepare and agree a Local Plan containing the numbers and locations of new housing growth. Ward councillors will be able to explain these plans and the likely timetable involved, which may cover some years of master planning, consultation, application for planning permission and then construction.



2. Church Responses

Congregational and leadership discussion will enable a Church understanding to be formulated concerning the proposals. Ecumenical conversations with other local churches at an early stage help to build

co-operative relationships and to identify who might speak to councils and developers on behalf of the Church. Strategic discussions with Dioceses,



Synods, Districts and Associations help to inform and gain support and advice. Further ongoing training can be offered to those representing the church to enable a contemporary, relevant and visionary response.

3. Prayer and theological reflection



Encourage congregational and personal prayer throughout the project in the attempt to discern the mind of God. Biblical study and theological reflection gives depth to the discussions with all the stakeholders involved, adds colour and shade to the church participation and prevents a weak and superficial involvement.

4. Meet the Developer

Appoint one or two church people to meet the developer as soon as possible. The Council Planning Department will supply the name and telephone number of the lead developer if a number are involved. Ask for a meeting at the developer's office to hear about the scheme and to demonstrate the interest of the church in the new community. Developers are unfailingly welcoming to church participation at this stage and will explain the broad picture as well as the fine details envisaged. Some developers will not understand church terminology and will need interpretation. Explain simply and clearly.

5. Attend the public Consultation

Councils and Developers increasingly hold exhibitions and consultations to explain the proposed new housing area and to gain some idea of the response of the community. Encourage church members to attend, ask questions and offer positive and negative insights. Prepare a brief written response paper and/or complete the questionnaire. Register contact details so that one person on behalf of the church receives regular email newsletters with up to date information.



6. Work out a clear vision for the new community

For hundreds of years the churches have been involved in building new communities with schools, healthcare, sports and transport. What kind of houses are required today? Should there be a church school(s)? Where would a community/leisure centre be positioned? What about shops, sports and cultural facilities? What kind of health centre/care is needed? Does there need to be a business area, technological park, IT centre? What imaginative ideas does the church have for a brand new housing area? It may take twenty years or more for your vision to be worked out, so be patient.

7. What can the church contribute?

For many decades the church has been actively church planting in new housing areas. Often this has meant gathering a group of Christian people in a home for worship Bible study and fellowship. As the numbers grow there is the need to obtain a rental building or buy some land and erect a

church centre. Latterly in new communities the churches have managed to obtain a house and employ a vicar/minister (often called a Pioneer) to live and work in the area as well as invite the developer to give a serviced site and occasionally a church community centre. This is achieved through the Section 106 Planning Agreement (S106).



Redditch church, shopping and medical centre

8. The Section 106 (S106)

This is a legal planning agreement made between the local authority and the developer as part of the planning permission to provide a number of vital and desirable features of the development, including roads, schools, health and community facilities. In some areas developers have provided a house for a pioneer minister or subsidised the cost, a serviced site for a church building at the rate of ½ hectare/3000 houses, a built community centre to be managed by the church, and a one-stop-shop which includes church, library, sport, police office, radio station, etc. The church can discuss with ward councillors what will be included in the S106.

9. Early church imaginative presence in the new community

Try to be present in the new build area within the first 100 houses. This could be by encouraging church members to move to a new home there as soon as possible, or appointing a church minister to live in a new house and begin to create an embryonic church community. (Some churches are specifically training pioneer ministers for this task.) It may be helpful to

invite nearby churches to form a church planting team to give assistance in the first five years. Meet in homes, temporary buildings (portakabins if permitted), the first school and in the open air. Fresh expressions can give a new understanding of the Faith in these situations.



The Ark, Cambourne

10. Job description

If appointing a church minister, worker or pioneer, agree a clear job description though allow for flexibility as the opportunities for involvement quickly change. Discuss with all project partners the person specification, the terms and length of the contract, the provision of housing and the budget. Recognise that the terms of reference will be different for a minister and a church worker, where the latter may be primarily focussed on the young, within a newly planted school or in the formation of a brand new community group. The job description for a pioneer minister may be very different and specific and include elements of calling, insights from the training organisation, peer group support and career development as well as attempting to describe in broad terms how the sponsoring body envisages the task and outcomes.

11. For very large, and small developments, visit every new occupant

Prepare a welcome and information sheet to give to every household within a week of arrival. Arrange regular welcome parties, activities for the very young, barbeques and special events to mark Christmas and Easter, etc. Warm friendship and an opportunity to meet others in the community is much appreciated in the midst of a building site when loneliness begins to occur after the initial excitement passes.

12. Seek to build imaginative new community

Every new development is a golden opportunity to establish a bright, caring, outward looking, mission centred church body which is integrated in the wider society attempting to grow a healthy and harmonious place. It all takes time to realise dreams for a new community to form so be patient. Visit good and bad examples of housing developments to learn about best practice. National and local marketing literature frequently overstates the desirability of the new place so try to be honest, realistic and frank with new residents and other interested parties.

13. Review progress after five and ten years

From the beginning build in a review process after five/ten years to measure progress. Invite an independent assessor to evaluate the direction and achievements of the project, presenting a report to all interested parties. Be prepared for unexpected advances as well as some disappointments. Remember that it seems to take thirty years for a new community to be established in the built environment, the human relationships dimension and spiritual maturity.



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