

Diocesan Response to New Housing Areas (New Communities)

An overview of the planning position, challenges and opportunities for mission arising from engagement in areas of new housing

Introduction

The Diocese of Oxford became aware of the scale of development likely to occur within its boundary through the publication of the South East Plan Panel Report (2007). The Plan or Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS)¹ designated the south east of England a *significant growth area* requiring a substantial amount of new housing to meet future growth needs, and set a regional target of 32,000 dwellings per year to be built over the period of the Plan 2006 - 2026.

The implications for the diocese were assessed by combining the total number of dwellings allocated to each of the 16 local councils within the diocesan area; this amounted to a cumulative total of 210,960 new dwellings by 2026, which translates into an increase of around 470,000 new residents. Growth of the scale and pace proposed in the Plan was unprecedented, and presented then as it does now a considerable challenge to the diocese.

The Response of the Diocese

Determined to do more than “simply provide ministry cover”, the Diocese developed the New Communities Initiative through which it envisioned the growth and flourishing of Christian communities, the development of new ways of being church, and playing an important role in building community.

The New Communities Initiative aims:

- a. to help build new sustainable Christian communities in new housing areas in the Diocese by developing, enhancing and coordinating strategic capacity in mission and ministry,
- b. to build social capital by increasing participation with others in the work of social cohesion and community development in the new housing areas,
- c. to plan, initiate and sustain a variety of ministries in these areas by resourcing and supporting the Church at the local level whilst working with our ecumenical partners wherever possible,
- d. to learn from the experience of a small number of pilot schemes by sharing the knowledge gained and applying these lessons to future initiatives.

¹ Regional Spatial Strategies were revoked under Section 109 (3) Localism Act 2011

New Communities

The diocese secured funding from the Church Commissioners of approximately £500,000 over 5 years to support mission in areas of new housing. Part of the allocation would part fund a full-time New Communities Development Officer (the remainder funded by a 0.5 Buckingham Archdeaconry post) and the balance of the allocation would be used to create an Opportunities Fund co-ordinated by the Diocesan New Communities Group.

New Communities prioritises large-scale strategic housing development of 1000 dwellings and more. It was felt a lower limit would increase the number of developments being considered thereby making this a very difficult project to manage. Furthermore, consultation for large-scale housing development is ‘frontloaded’ requiring “meaningful” engagement with local communities and stakeholders prior to submission, and, developers are obliged, under Section 106, to deliver significant levels of community infrastructure including schools, community halls and in some case, land set aside for community purposes. Hence proactive engagement with these would be the more likely to be productive.

The New Communities Development Officer

Peter Morgan, an experienced practitioner in town planning, was appointed in 2011, to provide a focus for new communities’ development work across the diocese. Peter’s core remit is to facilitate a creative local response to areas of new housing at the earliest stage.

He achieves this remit by:

- working with planners and developers in the three counties to understand plans and monitor the progress of development through the planning process,
- working with the local church, mainly through deaneries,
- monitoring the variety of local responses as projects and plans are developed and ensure that good practice is shared widely.

Responding to a varied political landscape is central to the role. However, in the main, across the diocese parishes have wished to see development deliver flexible multi-purpose community spaces suitable to a wide range of church-led activities including church expression.

Presently, there are 37 large-scale developments within the diocese, of which the parishes affected by all but 4 developments are actively engaging with the relevant local authority and/or developer. In every case, the relationship is on a sound footing and in some cases their negotiations have progressed to an advance stage.

New Communities Group

The group reports to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee. It brings together clergy and laity from key areas of housing development as well as representatives from the diocesan education and buildings departments. This group meets quarterly to coordinate the work of the New Communities Development Officer and maintains a general oversight of mission activity within areas of new housing. The group provides policy guidance on

resourcing mission in areas of new housing and distributes grants to projects across the Diocese.

Opportunities Fund has provided financial support for the creation of one pioneer minister post, and the set up costs and expenses for a chaplaincy post at Aylesbury Vale C of E Academy School in Berryfields development Aylesbury, and those for a further pioneer minister post within the Great Western Parks development in Didcot, a major growth area.

Working in collaboration with the United Reform Church, a further pioneer minister post has been created in the Eastern Expansion Area of Milton Keynes. The diocese has contributed to the success of this post through the provision of a house.

The group's most recent activities include the following:

- During 2014, the Group met in five strategic locations: Bicester, Aylesbury, Milton Keynes, Didcot and Wokingham. At each meeting local church leaders have had the chance to share news of developments with the New Communities Development Officer, with the rest of the group and with one another. In each case the group has learnt things from those 'on the ground' that they would not have known otherwise. Local leaders have been able to gain an overview and test out ideas.
- Schools have been a recurring issue. Responding to schools policy has been challenging around the issues such as governance and bidding.
- The Group now receives quarterly written reports from Pioneer Ministers currently working in Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, Bicester and Didcot. The Archdeacon of Oxford has hosted a networking lunch for them with key diocesan officers.
- Encouraged by the Glebe and Buildings Department the Group has progressed work to identified 5 priority areas for potential development posts and associated housing: Wokingham, Milton Keynes, Arborfield, Aylesbury and Bracknell Forest. The actual location of development posts within these 5 areas will come down to Deanery and Archdeaconry initiative and Mission Action Plans.
- The Group has begun to look at options for buildings on new estates, where shops, schools and community facilities often take years to arrive. Portakabins have been used, but we have also considered an innovative 'self-build' church and community facility helped by a presentation from a community architect.
- The Group has begun to look at how best to increase knowledge and capacity, particularly as Peter Morgan moves into the last year of his contract. The Group is looking to share information, experience and advice on its website over the coming months, and is planning a series of Conferences for later in 2015.

In order to provide a measure of support after his contract ends, Peter is seeking to enable local clergy and lay people by developing their skills in understanding how to engage effectively with the planning processes. He is also coordinating development of a web-based resource that will provide up-to-date resources for mission planning and sharing good practice across the diocese.

Pioneer Ministers

Two Pioneer ministers are now established in developments in Kingsmere, Bicester, and Broughton, Milton Keynes. Aylesbury Deanery appointed a priest to serve as Chaplain to the Aylesbury Vale Academy (including Berryfields Church of England Primary School), and to co-ordinate development work within new developments on the west of Aylesbury. Wallingford Deanery curate of the Parish of All Saints, Didcot, serves in part as pioneer minister to Great Western Park, Didcot.

Pioneer ministry and community ministers are transforming the experience of new residents within new housing development by:

- Hosting community events, with specifically Christian content.
- Serving as community advocates lobbying developers and local authorities on behalf of residents to improve community facilities or to provide facilities in a timely way.
- Mobilised volunteers for community events and action days, and,
- Providing leadership within these communities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the experience of new arrivals to an estate is greatly improved where there is a community minister in operation.

Building Capacity

Changes to the planning system, introduced under the previous *coalition* government, has re- invigorated the housing market. The introduction of “a presumption in favour of sustainable development” (‘the presumption’) has reoriented the planning process from one considered to be prohibitive, to one unabashedly pro-growth. And, along with key fiscal measures such as “Help to Buy”, underpinned by an improved economic outlook, the house building industry is returning to levels of activity which existed before the financial crisis of 2008-12.

The impact upon the diocese has been considerable. Each of the 10 deaneries and 48 parishes affected by large-scale housing developments are experiencing increased levels of development activity.

However, the response at the local level has been positive. Deaneries and parishes are responding innovatively, developing strategies and new skills to engage with development. They now routinely submit representations to public consultation in relation to emerging local plans as well as new development proposals. They are meeting with council officers and developers to discuss proposals and talk about the positive contribution of the local church towards building community and adding value to development. They are reviewing local assets in order to release, where possible, financial resources for redeployment into the new development. Supported by the work of the New Communities Development Officer, parishes at the local level are acquiring skills and knowledge, but most importantly, the experience of engaging with new development.

Beyond 2016, questions arise around the issue of building capacity. The role of New Communities Development Officer was created to bring to the diocese particular experience

and insights into the operations of the planning process in delivering large-scale housing developments. The appointment of a town planner to the role increased the capacity of the diocese to support the work of the parishes and deaneries in developing cogent responses which build social capital and credibility with the authorities.

The diocese no longer lacks knowledge and experience – these are abundant across the diocese. But, perhaps deficiencies lie in the **networks and links** to facilitate pooling skills and experiences together to the benefit of all.

The focus for *New Communities* during 2015/16 is Building Capacity. To that end, the New Communities Group is holding a series of **Building Capacity – New Communities Forums** during September. These are intended to bring together, over a series of events, those who are engaging with New Communities - to share experiences, stories and good practice with all parties seeking to respond to the challenges arising from large-scale housing development. The forums, together with an improved web-based resource and the continued work of the New Communities Development Officer, will provide the basis upon which networks and links can be created and embedded into the diocese.

Key challenges facing *New Communities*

- The New Communities Group now has overview of the 38 large-scale housing developments across the Diocese. Large-scale housing development will account for around 80,000 new homes within the diocese by 2031, an estimated 180,000 new residents. This is the equivalent to building a city the size of Oxford.

Q: Do we prioritise resources towards population growth areas?

- At the outset of the project it was considered that schools proposed as part of the large-scale development might act as the focus for new church communities. However, the changes in the rules around school governance have restricted the ability of the Diocesan Board of Education to expand into new academy schools. Parishes are therefore thinking innovatively about accommodation and local presence within new developments. Therefore, engagement with developers and influencing decisions around the Section 106 monies has taken on a greater significance.

Q: Are there ways to strengthen how our churches engage with developers and local decision makers?

- Within the context of community engagement and in relation to mission within areas of new housing. A greater awareness of the local politics and priorities, and consulting with community leaders on the contents of the deaneries and churches Mission Action Plans might strengthen the relationship between the local church and local authority and highlight areas of common purpose.

Q: Could Mission Action Plans better align church and community priorities?

Our church leaders are effective at representing church interests on bodies such as Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Local Economic Partnerships (LEP) and other voluntary partnership boards.

Q: Can these relationships do more to inform the preparation of Mission Action Plans to help them avoid becoming inward facing and unaware of the local context?

- Understanding the nature of large-scale housing development is key. Large-scale development is primarily characterised by its scale and is seldom contained within a single parish. They tend to cross boundaries and will bring together parishes which perhaps wouldn't naturally collaborate. Continually finding new ways of working will be to the benefit of all. Communities, civic authorities and developers are not interested in sensitivities between church traditions.

Q: Can we build in the positive lessons learned in those pilot projects where churches of differing traditions have found common purpose in kingdom building locally?

- Experience is showing that pioneer work leading to sustainable Christian communities on new estates is the work of 7-10 years rather than 3-5 years. This needs to be factored in to development post planning and ongoing direction and evaluation.

Q: How do we identify where seeking to establish a new church could be possible and appropriate, and what are the best ways to achieve this?

Our Response

- The New Communities Group is mindful of the scale of the task and increasingly looking at ways to advise the diocese on priorities. Building capacity is as much about empowerment, promoting self-sufficiency, reducing reliance upon the centre and finding solutions locally. This is demonstrated in certain deaneries where the disposal of an asset in one location has released resources to invest in mission in new communities.

Building capacity also means facilitating the flow of information, knowledge and experience between parishes and deaneries and individuals. The Group is exploring ways to create networks which will facilitate better sharing of our individual gifts and abilities.
- The group is preparing a definitive guide on academy schools to inform parishes of what is and is not possible, of the limits to what the Board of Education can influence locally and the options open to parishes seeking closer ties with a new academy school proposed within a local development.
- With respect to collaborative working, there have been demonstrations of unity of purpose and in some cases a willingness to forego difference in favour of shared mission outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

The diocese recognised very early that the scale of growth and expansion planned would pose significant challenges within our parishes. The New Communities Initiative is providing much needed access to help, advice and support during the transition.

Through local action, the diocese is proactively and positively engaging with new development via the planning process. The parishes and deaneries affected by development are responding to consultation and "getting involved"; this wasn't always the case.

In relation of major development proposals, local authorities now expect to see representation from an emboldened local church. Thus parishes and deaneries are

becoming recognisable local representatives who seek to understand the provisions contained within a development proposal to foster social integration and build community. Local authorities are also seeking assurances that new development is well planned and characterised by the way in which it puts people, communities and their interactions at its heart - for the good of all.

This is a key area where we can and do further God's Mission in these new communities.

Peter Morgan

New Communities Development Officer

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