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4 people talking over coffee in a church

Tina was living in a hostel before she was finally moved into her own home. With a shortage of small properties in the area, she was placed in a three-bed house, but when she got there, she found that because of the bedroom tax she was unable to afford her rent.¹ She got into arrears, and soon she was served with an eviction notice.

The team at St Barnabas Church in Wigan hear all sorts of stories like this. In one of the most deprived parishes in the country, the bedroom tax isn't the only issue affecting the stability of people's homes. Unemployment is high in the area, and drug and alcohol abuse are common. St Barnabas felt compelled to act. There's no one silver bullet, so they take a variety of approaches.

St Barnabas started by offering a daily drop-in in their church hall. This allows them to meet people who need help, and housing is a part of many of their stories. They also host other community organisations here, including a debt advice provider and Addaction, a substance misuse service.

As they heard more stories like Tina's, their assistance grew more hands-on – reading and writing letters or making phone calls for people. They soon realised that the presence of a vicar or volunteer meant that cases were taken more seriously. As their former vicar Denise Hayes explained, "the collar speaks". Tina, for example, was awarded a Discretionary Housing Payment to cover the gap in rent after Denise came with her to the court hearing.

Another way they deal with housing issues is through working with people with addictions. Denise explained "when you're dealing with addiction, are you going to buy drugs, or are you going to pay your landlord?" By tackling addiction, they can build up people's housing stability.

They want to develop this work further, though. There's an acute shortage of supported accommodation in the area. This means that while someone may go through rehabilitation, they come back into the community and "end up being taken back in by users and dealers". As Denise puts it, "it's a vicious cycle that we need to break".

That's why St Barnabas are opening up yet another part of their work – a new community hub, including a nine-bedroom supported home for those recovering from addiction. For Denise, this was a response to hearing about a local man who had come to the drop-in and subsequently committed suicide. She felt that "if he could have had the kind of 24/7 support, he could be alive today."

Your church may not hear stories like these, but that's often because they're hidden beneath the surface. The Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community is encouraging churches to proactively find out about the issues affecting their communities and then see how they can respond. St Barnabas's work started small, and it only expanded as they realised how they could help people. Ann Fairhurst, one of the team leaders in the church's community ministry, explained: "People call it social action, but we're not social workers, we're just a group of people doing God's loving service, getting alongside and walking with people".

Notes

1. The so-called "bedroom tax" is an element of Housing Benefit/Universal Credit entitlement which since 2013 means that you receive less in HB/UC if you live in a housing association or council property with more bedrooms than are deemed necessary for you and your household.
2. The material for this case study was originally featured in Building Community, a 2019 report produced by the Centre for Theology and Community and the Church of England which launched the Housing Commission. It has been updated and revised.
3. Denise moved on in 2019, but the commitment at St Barnabas has allowed this work to continue. Although her successor Revd Rachel Sheehan works across four churches rather than two, the volunteers have ensured that this does not affect their work.
4. The community hub will also include a community café, debt and benefits services, laundry and shower rooms and a crèche. The idea is that it will provide a supportive environment for those living in the accommodation.
5. The community hub is being developed in collaboration with Addaction and Partners Foundation, a registered social landlord specialising in supported accommodation. Partners Foundation are covering some of the costs, alongside managing the project.
6. In October 2019, the new hub received planning permission. St Barnabas have secured £1 million to fund the supported accommodation, and they are putting together a funding proposal for another £1 million for the remainder of the work.

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