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Assembly '18
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Â The housing crisis is evident in several ways in Ealing. Many are struggling to pay the high rents â itâs a desirable area, but workers essential to the life of the area are often on low wages or have insecure jobs. This forces families into cramped accommodation. Few can even dream of buying a house to feel secure in the area which they call home. Even those able to buy often have to work long, unsociable hours to pay the mortgage.

We know this because members of local churches are themselves experiencing these problems. Realising they needed to change something, St Barnabas and Christ the Saviour started a campaign about affordable housing. The Archbishop of Canterburyâs Commission on Housing, Church and Community wants to encourage churches to follow their lead. As Jackie Ashmenall from Christ the Saviour suggested, âchurches, whether large or small, have a link into the communityâ and have the power to make change.

Both churches are members of Citizens UKâ an alliance of local community institutions (faith groups, schools, colleges and other third sector organisations) who work together for their common good, for the people they represent and for their community. Citizens advocates âcommunity organisingâ â campaigning based on one-to-one conversations which reveal the problems facing the community. So, when these churches realised that insecure housing was a real issue, they talked with members of their congregation to build up a picture of what wasnât working.

When local elections came in 2018, they asked the other alliance members to work with them to try to fix these problems. Together, they represented a lot of people in the area, and their organisations are integral to the local community. They wrote a list of âasksâ for the candidates to be leader of the council. The demands were presented at an assembly, where local people told their stories. The power of these stories and the coalition meant that all the candidates agreed to their demands, and they are now being delivered. The asks were:

- To push developers to provide 50% affordable housing on all new developments in the borough
- To extend selective landlord licensing across the whole borough (for more info see the notes below)
- To run rentersâ rights workshops
- To identify a piece of land on which 50 new community-run homes could be built

Jackie said that their success was because “we’re not a pressure group”. Instead, the churches did this to represent their congregation and their community. They believe in building relationships rather than making impossible demands. Jackie emphasised that churches also bring a unique perspective: “I don’t leave my faith outside the door” when meeting with politicians. Justin Dodd, the vicar of St Barnabas, explained that community organising is a natural extension of the churches’ mission – combining direct services such as night shelters with “dealing with the systemic issue”. It’s also had a significant impact on the internal culture of the church, fostering a more relational and outward looking ethos, building leaders and enabling the clergy to be more effective in mission and change management.

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Jackie is really proud of the wins they have had, but she says the process itself has also been empowering and has strengthened the fellowship between church members, who hadn’t realised what others were going through.

The housing crisis affects us all. There are lots of ways for churches to respond – from direct service delivery to campaigning – but they should all start with understanding the problem. Â Why not spend some time listening to people most affected by it, starting with your own congregation?

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Notes:

1. Membership of Citizens UK costs a church between Â£1,000 and Â£2000 a year.
2. Alongside one-to-one conversations of up to an hour, the affordable housing asks were based on quantitative research of need in the area.
3. The first three asks have already been delivered. Land for the community-run housing scheme (or Community Land Trust) has been identified, and Ealing Citizens is now working with partners to deliver the homes.
4. Selective landlord licensing:Â Ealing Council requires landlords to apply for a license if they rent out homes in certain parts of the borough where there is a particular issue with the quality of properties. It was asked that this be extended across the whole borough – which would require permission from national government.



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