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How do you foster a strong community voice? The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Housing, Church and Community has been grappling with this question. Maybe residents' associations, or local referendums? This misses one thing. For a strong community voice, you need a strong community.

Design, lack of facilities and inaccessible services can hinder community building. The poorest often lose out - the recent Housing Design Audit for England highlighted that corners are being cut in design and facilities in less affluent areas. As local authority and housing association budgets have been squeezed, funding for community development has also been reduced.

The Strawberry Vale Estate in Finchley has division literally built into it. People who live right next to one another are separated by gates, while people stay in their houses because the enclosed passageways of the estate feel unsafe.

It's no wonder that until recently there was no residents' association. While the housing association would offer public meetings, some residents felt unable to raise their issues, feeling alone in their situations.

Hope North London and church@five

Thirty years ago, Helen Shannon was a single mum living on a housing estate. She understood the powerlessness that many felt. When she was called to ministry, she was eager to help those who were in the position she'd been in, so moved back to a housing estate, to Strawberry Vale.

Helen was trained in 'incarnational' ministry. Incarnational ministers may not preach on a regular basis. Their ministry focuses more on action in their community. Helen did not run church services for over two years, instead helping her neighbours, showing them God's love. While this often leads people to find Jesus, the help given is unconditional.

With a Christian charity, Hope North London, Helen set about building community and empowering individuals on Strawberry Vale and two other estates. They befriended people, and ran festivals, parties, youth groups and coffee drop-ins on the estate, to bring the community together. Hope's workers helped to set up a food bank. A church Helen has established, church@five, is run by a team, including local lay leaders who also lead and preach. All these things are great, but what's interesting is the growth of the community's voice.



In the short term, members of the church act as advocates for the community. When the housing association offered compensation for a broken heating system, some residents were concerned that this would come straight off their rent arrears when they needed money to eat and to heat their homes. Hope's workers found that many people had the same problem, and were able to raise this issue with the housing association. This led them to provide food vouchers for those in this situation.

In the long term, though, Hope see themselves as 'fire-starters', empowering the community to speak for themselves. This work is starting to pay off. Since the church's arrival, a residents' association has been created.

These things may seem small, but are key to rebalancing power. Too often, churches and other charities are paternalistic in the way they help

others. church@five shows us a different approach. Standing up for the poorest means helping them stand up for themselves.

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Notes:

1. Revd Helen Shannon's salary and accommodation is provided by her church, St Barnabas North London.
2. Church@Five was set up after Revd Shannon had built relationships with her neighbours for over two years. It is funded through a Bishop's Mission Order.
3. Church@Five has a large, broad attendance, with a weekly attendance of between fifty-five and seventy-five people, with one hundred on their books, despite only being a few years old.
4. Hope North London is a Christian charity which originally ran youth centres. In recent years, they moved to a less 'attractional' model, instead running activities and outreach work on the estates where they were needed.
5. Hope North London and church@five also work with a project called Eden Network, which 'sends and supports teams of urban missionaries to share the gospel, make disciples and rebuild communities'. This 'Live in Team' ensures that their vision is not removed from the communities that they are serving.

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