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St Silas, Blackburn had a problem. Their church hall was falling into disrepair. At the same time, Nightsafe, a charity working with homeless young people, had issues housing 16-18-year-olds together with their older clients, aged up to 25. Together, they had an opportunity.

Rather than simply repairing the hall, St Silas took this opportunity to think about what the best use for the building would be. Sheelagh Aston, their priest-in-charge, was introduced to Nightsafe, and they quickly noticed their shared passion for making a difference to the local areas. This gave them confidence to move forward with what would be a complex project: renovating the hall to create a home for six young people at risk of homelessness. This work is vital in an area where there are up to 50 young people sleeping rough every night, and many more in precarious accommodation.

At this point, a unique opportunity came up when Children in Need, who had worked with Nightsafe before, approached them with an offer: a free renovation on a property, through the show DIY:SOS! Although the project was already progressing, this sped the process up by years. Over the course of just a few months, plans were drawn up, leases were signed and the whole space was rebuilt.

The accommodation is stunning – St Silas joke that it could otherwise be an expensive AirBnB. Space is ample, with each resident getting an en-suite and a mezzanine floor for their bed, allowing separation between the sleeping and living areas. As one of the residents put it, “Best bedroom ever!” There are also large communal areas, where they are taught skills from cooking to finances, all of which are accredited so that these can be used to increase their employability. Those who have moved in say that “it’s like having a family around me.”

I very much suspect I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for Nightsafe.

Former resident

The project benefits both the church and the charity. St Silas have found a use for their building, the lease from which provides them a small revenue stream, while Nightsafe were able to get a wonderful building at an affordable rate. To offset the cost of the rent, St Silas are donating to Nightsafe, making it a true partnership.



member of the congregation when she heads down to the house,

St Silas wants to go further, building a real relationship. When the church held a thanksgiving service for the opening of the house, both the residents and congregation learnt from meeting one another. They are keen to keep these relationships going, and a joint gardening project is in the works.

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Housing, Church and Community is investigating how churches can respond to local housing needs. Safe@Silas shows that this work is not only important, but also really beneficial for churches. With so many churches in a similar position, this could be a model for others.

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Notes

1. The church hall of St Silas (known as the Parish Centre) was let out to community groups. Since the narthex at the back of the main church building was reordered in the late twentieth century, its use directly by the church had been limited. This made the PCC question its missional use.
2. The Parish Centre sustained some damage in recent years, and would have required considerable renovation.
3. Nightsafe is a charity in Blackburn for vulnerably housed 16-25 year olds. They provide accommodation, as well as a day centre and other support, teaching health and wellbeing: <https://www.blackburn-nightsafe.org.uk/>
4. St Silas and Nightsafe were introduced by Stephen Hetherington, a Methodist working on bringing empty buildings into use.
5. St Silas rent the former Parish Centre to Nightsafe on a five-year lease (a condition of Children in Need's donation) for market rent. At the same time, both St Silas and the Diocese of Blackburn donate to Nightsafe to allow the charity to develop a sustainable funding stream for this new project, effectively subsidising the rent on the new premises.

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