



The Churches Group for New Housing Areas meeting with the Minister for Housing, Mark Prisk, MP
15/4/13

The Minister for Housing, the church and new housing areas



The Minister for Housing, Mark Prisk, met four members of the Churches Group for New Housing Areas, at the Department for Communities and Local Government on 15th April 2013. The Minister, joined by Laura Wilkinson and Nick Stripe (Housing Policy), met Simon Taylor, Carol Richards, James Cassidy and Jim Currin representing the New Housing Group from Churches Together in England.

During the meeting, the Minister heard how churches in England have invested significant time, finance, building and personnel in new housing areas. This includes church leaders considering the new housing agenda, area resource people appointed, pioneer ministers living on new developments, and ecumenical partnerships in such places as Elvetham Heath and Cambourne. Many local churches are responding to new housing , whether new towns or add on estates.

The Minister heard about the Church Commissioners support fund £7.25m and the 'More than Bricks and Mortar?' report of the Joint Public Issues Team (Baptist, Methodist, URC), as well as the work of the Churches Coordinating Group for New Housing Areas and the web resource for all churches: www.cte.org.uk/newhousing. Reflecting on his own Methodist and Anglican roots, he encouraged the churches to work ecumenically and noted the track record of churches working together in new communities.

The Minister appreciated the work of the churches in creating community, often where there is no community, and the staff appointments at considerable cost and commitment to make it happen. Places discussed included Cranbrook, Devon and Barking Riverside in London. He was interested to know how appointments had been made.

The Minister also heard about concerns and issues considered by the Churches Group for New Housing Areas, on behalf of the wider church, and made the following comments which have been agreed for wider circulation.

Creating community. Recognising that some new estates built in the past struggle with a sense of community today, Mr Prisk said he wanted planners to think of attractive and sustainable communities that people would want to live in for years to come. To be 'attractive' and 'sustainable' includes community facilities which meet local need, including schools, community centres, shops and transport. Simon Taylor, as moderator of the Churches group, noted with thanks that 'Places of Worship' are included in the National Planning Policy Framework. Mark Prisk quoted the Prince of Wales vision of good communities and the model of 'village'. He encouraged churches at regional and local level to get involved in community discussion of their own Neighbourhood Plan – 480 local areas are now working on them at present.

Section 106 agreements. Simon Taylor said how the churches had worked with the established pattern of s106's in the past and noted that they were not referred to in the National Planning Policy Framework as a mechanism for developers to provide community facilities in the future. Rev Taylor, who had experience of negotiating a s106 agreement, asked whether the new proposed Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) would work at the local church level e.g. in relation to a community hall being built. Mr Prisk agreed that the CIL, when adopted, would work on a wider scale, but should have a bearing on local facilities. He said he would look to his officials to provide advice on whether CIL could facilitate the kind of community facilities s106's have facilitated in the past.

Social housing. Mr Prisk quoted the short fall of social housing provision, even with increased targets already met in some places, and listened to the churches concern for social housing expressed by Housing Justice and JPIT More than Bricks and Mortar report. He suggested that private and social housing were sometimes seen as opposites and a third way might be the way forward, ie. Housing Associations. Mr Prisk appreciated that the church has some track record and experience in this area, and encouraged more discussion among church leaders Housing Associations and affordable housing. The Minister is speaking at the 10th Annual Conference of Housing Justice in June.

Church representatives and Local Authorities. The Churches Group for New Housing encourage local church leaders and representatives to get involved in the planning process as early as possible, and reported that this had been a very long and frustrating journey for some people, especially when trying to justify why the church should be at the table in planning new communities at all. Mr Prisk encouraged the churches to continue engaging with Local Authorities, especially with the new Neighbourhood Plans, to work in partnership with all community groups, while he would encourage Local Authorities to appreciate the church contribution in the planning process.

Healthy communities. There was some discussion about 'community' and the experience in some areas where community provision was promised and for a variety of reasons, not delivered. Simon Taylor quoted Mark Prisk's own blog about the 'economic driver' for new housing, to which the Minister said new communities still had to be 'communities'. In making a distinction between hard and soft infrastructure, Mr Prisk spoke of the roads and houses needing people and 'place' by saying, 'in order to have sustainable community we need to think about the personal aspects as well as building'.

Jim Currin, Secretary for the CTE Churches Group for New Housing Areas

[Jim.currin\(AT\)cte.org.uk](http://Jim.currin(AT)cte.org.uk) Documents referred to can be found on www.cte.org.uk/newhousing