

Micro Homes for the Homeless: Can churches help?

Housing is such a complex, expensive and slow process to change, but Martin Clark demonstrates that a modern version of modular factory-built housing could result in a major reduction in homelessness. The units cost £45,000 and a successful house-builder has decided to build 200. The main problem is finding land at reasonable cost, and Martin appeals to churches to provide land for short-term use.

Is it possible to create six houses for homeless people in a day? This is what we set out to discover in trying to respond to rising levels of homelessness last year.

My charity *Allia* is based in Cambridge and emerged from the *Relationships Foundation / Jubilee Centre* think tanks back in the late 1990s which responded to unemployment, initially by creating financial products that enabled people to invest safely in their own communities around the country. Lots of small businesses and community-

based jobs were created, but the underlying mechanism was based on lending large sums of money to housing associations to build social housing. This got *Allia* interested in the subject of housing, but it wasn't until recently that we started to consider what we could do more directly about it.

With over 300,000 people defined as homeless nationally before the pandemic according to *Shelter*, and endemic levels locally in Cambridge because of high house prices and some incomers, the situation was daunting.

Housing is such a strange paradox in the UK: there is a cultural obsession with home ownership but it is also a cause of deep division and misery. I feel passionately as a Christian that 'enough good housing for all' is a goal to which we should collectively aspire. There is biblical ground for this. Isaiah's vision of a future Golden Age is one in which everyone is able to occupy and feel secure in their own house (Is 65:21-22). Jesus was effectively homeless for the greater part of his ministry: 'the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (Lk 9:58).



Photo: Jack Taylor/Getty Images

The homeless could surely be added to the list of needy people through whom we encounter Jesus when we help them (Mt 25:31-46).

But housing is such a complex, expensive and slow process to change – as any government that has tried to boost delivery will confirm.

I started to follow the emergence of modular factory-built housing which many hope will one day be the norm but has been slow to take off in the UK. We'd also heard about schemes to use micro homes for homeless people, sometimes on temporary sites – though some had used converted containers which either had problems with leaks or lacked dignity.

I had come to know a charity called *New Meaning Foundation* who train excluded young people in modern methods of construction, and we hatched a plan to build modular units for the homeless, which could take advantage of temporary sites before being relocated. In fact homeless people could even join in with the construction – a virtuous circle!

We had a respected local charity, *Jimmy's Cambridge*, ready to identify suitable occupants and provide them

support. We just needed a site... but land in Cambridge is horribly expensive and fiercely contested. I walked and cycled every part of the city for a year, Google Mapped endlessly, approached landowners, and the council searched its own unused corners.

Nothing suitable could be found and I was close to giving up when I asked an old friend who was vicar of a church that was planning to redevelop its site whether short-term use might be possible. Amazingly he quickly agreed and got the PCC on board.

I suddenly needed to raise the funds to build the units and start the process of planning permission. Lots of things happened in the wrong order or at the same time, whereas a regular housing developer would do things in carefully planned steps. However, we should not be surprised by this: God is in the business of bringing order out of chaos – he did this supremely in the person of Jesus. Organising a project is very much a work of the *logos* operating through us. We ordered the units and started preparing the site before securing planning permission, which then ran into challenges because the council hadn't dealt with anything like this before and initially wanted to define it

as a mobile home site – which would have meant putting six-metre spacing between each unit for fire safety reasons. This would have made the site unviable as the units needed to be laid in a tight terrace and were highly fire-proofed for that reason, but once this and a few other problems were ironed out, permission was eventually granted. We then had to organise utility connections and find a friendly contractor to help us prepare the site. Local property companies donated funds for four of the units (the long-term price is £45k each but the pilot price was lower). *New Meaning* built the units in a loaned warehouse on a nearby former army site. The planning consultant, architect and engineer generously worked *pro bono*.

All was going pretty well – albeit a few months slower than hoped – when Covid struck and work on the site stopped. There followed a heartbreaking and costly two-month delay before work resumed.

However, when the big day came in late May the delivery and connections did indeed take less than a day. Everyone held their breath as the first unit was lifted from the low loader high over the site and swung onto the waiting screw pile foundations. Nothing broke!

The first unit unloaded

Photo: Allia Impact





The units are popular

Photo: Allia Impact

From there it was a few weeks of final site tidying and furnishing the units, including testing them by sleeping over one night, before the first resident moved in. The units feel remarkably spacious with a kitchen and dining area, sofa/TV space, enclosed bathroom and separate bedroom – all in 25m² which, while below the national space standard for a one-bed unit, is bigger than plenty of studios still sold on the market. The planning committee approved the unit size because for most residents these units will be a stepping-stone to more regular housing.

Residents have now been living there since June and the units are popular and comfortable. One says he'd like to live there forever, which may be a challenge, though we have said that in principle if the units are successfully moved to a new location we are happy for residents to continue.

The prospect of relocating the houses is a daunting one as it will mean a new planning application and some further fundraising, as well as putting aside a large part of the rent. Ideally future sites will last longer, working on the basis that they are semi-permanent but the units can be moved if necessary, rather than guaranteeing that they will have to move.

Most excitingly others have been inspired to use this approach. The successful house-builder *Hill Group* funded a unit and then decided to do 200 similar ones nationally for their 20th anniversary; and the local *It Takes a City* homelessness partnership which was launched by Archbishop Rowan Williams in late 2018 is developing its own community land trust in Cambridge to find a larger site for such units.

It Takes a City is an apt name because it does feel we only achieved anything as a result of help from a huge range of generous supporters. However, more needs to be done, as rough sleepers housed in hotels and other temporary locations this year will have to move out at some point in 2021, and meanwhile the multi-layered economic and mental health crisis caused by the pandemic will create a new wave of homelessness.

So we urgently need to pursue more modular schemes with churches or other landowners willing to respond to homelessness in their area by letting their site be used in this way, with the land given back within an agreed time or when needed for another use. Other vital forms of support can be through funding and site preparation works. Our vision is for every church with spare land to care for the homeless in their community this way. Do get in touch if you can help. 



Martin Clark is CEO of Allia Impact, part of the Allia group which issues social investment bonds, runs centres for social and environmental businesses, and provides business support programmes for impact ventures. Martin has been with the organisation since it span out of the Relationships Foundation think tank in the late 90s. He is passionate about social entrepreneurship, author of The Social Entrepreneur Revolution, and is a fellow of the Centre for Social Innovation at Cambridge Judge Business School. martin.clark@allia.org.uk; www.allia.org.uk.