

REIGATE'S STORY:

Take a blank sheet of paper and dream

In January and February 2001, the Revd Clive McKie visited 17 different groups and committees across the life of Reigate Methodist Church and asked them to take a blank sheet of paper and dream. During these visits, he heard over and over again the comment: "We are in the High Street, but nobody knows we are here." Another frequent comment was that people wanted the church premises to glorify God, whereas this was not felt to be the case at that time. Over 600 dreams were gathered, from which 29 were selected.

These dreams were displayed on the walls of the church hall on 'See the Dreams Sunday'. After the morning service, the congregation went into the hall where they were given tea or coffee and 10 red-dot stickers. They then had the opportunity to read the dreams and vote for their favourite ones using the stickers. In this way, everyone was able to engage with the dreams and state their view of what the church priorities should be, and everyone bought into the outcome.

The biggest dream by far was to investigate replacing the dilapidated, non-accessible church hall with an extension to the rear of the church that would house a new high-quality hall, entrance concourse and meeting rooms. In June 2001, the Church Council commissioned a feasibility study and the 'grand design' began to take shape. The initial idea was to replace the existing rooms with a modern attractive equivalent. However, having talked to and visited several other churches, it became apparent that if the church was able to build a premises with a few more meeting rooms than they already had, their projected income from lettings would allow them to employ a part-time centre manager who could organise the running of the whole enterprise. This became a vision to provide Reigate with a community centre that would bring about a new and vibrant hub of local activity in the centre of the town. It would provide a valuable resource for the whole community with accessible and flexible facilities designed to meet identified needs.

The 2007 consultation for the Community Action Plan for Reigate identified that "the town is quite fragmented with lots of different users and there is a need for better community coherency ... [and] more events in the town to improve community spirit and increase footfall into the area, thus supporting the local economy" (Charlotte Fletcher, Community Liaison Officer). The Reigate Community Centre would address these issues by enabling local businesses, charitable, cultural, leisure and sports organisations to develop new initiatives and social networks in a central, purpose-built venue.

In developing the proposals, the church carried out their own consultations with local community organisations, existing users of the building and church members in order to take proper account of local needs and current facilities. These consultations revealed that, although Reigate appeared to be a comfortably off town in the commuter belt, there was a serious lack of local community facilities, which made it difficult for organisations to provide services locally, especially for the young, the elderly and those with special needs. The neighbouring towns of Dorking, Leatherhead, Redhill and Crawley all had theatres and community halls in the town centre, but Reigate had no central hall or theatre. The church had the vision to become an attractive and accessible centre for local people, including local government and businesses, voluntary, community and statutory organisations. This would build up the sense of community in Reigate town centre and enrich the spirit of the town.

The end of the journey – or, at least, the end of the beginning – came in 2011 when, after much fundraising and hard work, Reigate Community Centre was opened to the public. The centre is now open six days a week, run entirely by volunteers, and currently used by over 50 different groups.

www.reigatecommunitycentre.org.uk