

33. Update on Housing and Homelessness work

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Background

1. The 2018 Conference passed Notice of Motion 206 expressing concern about the crisis in housing and homelessness. It recognised the existing commitment of many churches to tackling the problem, and highlighted the need for a ‘whole society’ response to the crisis. The Conference asked for a number of actions to be undertaken.
2. In October 2018 the Methodist Council adopted a Connexional Property Strategy, and there is within that the potential for the Methodist Church to put its capital assets to greater social use.
3. The Methodist Church’s commitment to make a meaningful difference in this area comes at a time of greater political potential for action. The Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) places greater expectations on local authorities through a new statutory duty to prevent and relieve homelessness. In addition, the Government has committed to halve rough sleeping by 2022, and eliminate it altogether by 2027.

Actions taken since the 2018 Conference

4. **Political action:** A letter was sent by the President and the Vice-President of the Conference to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, in which they set out how the Conference had expressed its deep concerns at the sharp increase in rough sleeping and homelessness in the UK. The letter requested details of the actions being undertaken and the funding streams being made available to address the issue and the causes, and urged an acceleration of the target dates and a significant increase in support. At the time of writing, a response is still awaited.
5. **Report to Spring Synods:** The Conference asked that evidence be gathered from Districts of the various responses that Local Churches and Circuits are making across the Connexion, and for the publication of a report for discussion at spring Synods. This report (available at <https://www.methodist.org.uk/housing/>) demonstrated how churches are offering respite to people experiencing homelessness, running night shelters, and even offering accommodation. The report offered a holistic model to shape our response, as proposed by the Homelessness Action Network in Greater Manchester:
 - **Reduction:** tackling the causes of homelessness. This includes practical and political actions.

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- **Respite:** providing a safe place for people off the street.
- **Recovery:** managing issues, stabilising individuals and working towards independence through support, wellbeing, life skills and steps towards employment, volunteering, training and education.
- **Reconnection:** enabling individuals to lead meaningful lives with choice and agency in our community.

The report offered questions for Districts and Synods to consider, and responses are welcomed at nom206@methodistchurch.org.uk as this work continues.

6. **Scoping Day:** A scoping day on housing was convened by the Secretary of the Conference, gathering together a small number of people with an interest and expertise in housing and homelessness, members of JPIT and staff supporting property work in the Connexional Team. This meeting enabled discussion of good practice, the resourcing of Local Churches, Circuits and Districts to serve their communities, and consideration of what a connexional response to the crisis might look like. This meeting discussed the need to ensure that Local Churches and Circuits are well supported as they develop their own plans around property, and an approach that recognises the different needs in rural and urban communities.
7. **Connexional Property Strategy:** The Connexional Property Strategy (2018-20) was adopted by the Methodist Council. It expresses the missional imperative of the Church, and emphasises that “property resources should be used so as to give maximum effect to their value and to missional opportunities”. Circuits and/or Districts will be supported in the production of property development plans as a means of evaluating and planning how property can be used to assist in delivering the circuit or district mission plan. Using property to provide housing, and particularly social housing, is part of this work. Alison Olugunna has been appointed as Director of Strategic Property Development in the Connexional Team. Although her brief is wider, Alison has a background in social housing development. Churches can already sell their property at below market value to housing associations, and can receive legal and practical help from the Connexional Team to explore the most effective use of the Church’s considerable property portfolio.
8. **Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Housing, Church and Community:** A Methodist intern will be appointed to the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Housing, Church and Community. Their work will strengthen ecumenical links and continue to support connexional work, ensuring strong links between the work of the Property Development Committee, the Conference Office, the Communications team, and the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT). They will complete the work requested by the Conference to consider alternative housing models, particularly those being trialled in Greater Manchester.

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9. **Resource:** *More than Bricks and Mortar? Forming theological, practical and political responses to the housing crisis* has been updated by the JPIT. This short resource informs readers about the scale of the housing crisis, considers why Christians should be particularly engaged, and then offers suggestions about what we – as individuals and churches – can all do to make a meaningful difference. It is available at www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/poverty-and-inequality/

***RESOLUTIONS

33/1. The Conference receives the Report.

33/2. The Conference commends the work being undertaken by churches and communities across the Connexion to support people experiencing homelessness, provide housing, and combat the housing crisis.

33/3. The Conference encourages Circuits and Districts when producing their property development plans to consider increasing the social impact of property in local mission, and to consider how property might play a role in a holistic housing strategy of reduction, respite, recovery and reconnection as set out in the Report.

33/4. The Conference urges Her Majesty's Government to: accelerate its targets to reduce and eliminate rough sleeping; allow local authorities to build more housing; and enable the building of more genuinely affordable housing as a means of building stronger and more cohesive communities.