

**Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Faith meeting**

**Faith in Housing**

**Wednesday 20 October 2021 from 12.00 – 13.15**

**Online via Zoom**

**Present**

1. Adrian Allabarton
2. Ainsley Griffiths, Church in Wales
3. Altaf Hussain MS
4. Andrea Adams, Welsh Government (Observer)
5. Andrew Misell, Alcohol Change UK
6. Bonnie Navarra, Housing Justice Cymru (Speaker)
7. Carys Moseley, Presbyterian Church of Wales
8. Christine Abbas, Baha'i Council for Wales
9. Curtis Shea, Office of Darren Millar MS
10. Darren Millar MS (Chair)
11. David Emery, The Salvation Army and Chaplain to the Senedd
12. Dr Maryyum Mehmood, University of Birmingham
13. Gareth Davies MS
14. Gethin Rhys, Cytûn
15. Jane Dodds MS
16. Jim Stewart (Note taker)
17. Joel James MS
18. John Davies
19. Lee Gonzales, Office of Joel James MS
20. Mike Hedges MS
21. Molly Conrad, Partnerships and Public Affairs Officer for the Catholic Church
22. Nathan Sadler, Evangelical Alliance Wales
23. Peredur Owen Griffiths MS
24. Peter Harrison, British Army
25. Professor Andrew Davies, University of Birmingham
26. Russell George MS
27. Sam Rowlands MS
28. Sarah Jones, Church in Wales

**Apologies:**

1. Bishop June Osbourne, Church in Wales
2. David-Lewis Barker, Catholic Church in Wales
3. Kate McColgan, Interfaith Council for Wales

#### 4. Stephen Lodwick, British Army Chaplain

##### **Minutes:**

1. Darren Millar MS opened the meeting, welcomed everyone and gave apologies. He congratulated Bonnie Navarra, the guest speaker, on her recent wedding.

2. Darren introduced Bonnie Navarra, Director of Housing Justice Cymru, who then gave a presentation on their work:

##### **Supporting people with housing needs throughout the pandemic**

When Bonnie joined Housing Justice Cymru around the time of the start of the Covid pandemic, the main operating model for their work in Wales was the night shelters. With public health guidance and Welsh Government guidance, it was decided that the night shelters were no longer feasible options for accommodating people experiencing homelessness

Bonnie had to work very rapidly with Housing Justice Cymru's 600 church volunteers across Wales to move their services to become more preventative and to support Welsh Government and their actions to move people into more suitable emergency accommodation. Bonnie praised the faith communities' ability to adapt their approaches during the pandemic and mentioned that The Centre for Homelessness Impact produced a report that highlighted faith groups' adaptability in the UK during this time. In this report, statutory services recognised the benefits that faith groups brought during the complex time of Covid and faith groups' adaptability and agility in connecting people to services and food.

##### **Faith in Affordable Housing**

A crucial part of ending homelessness is housing supply. There is a lot of derelict property or land that churches have and Housing Justice Cymru works with housing providers across Wales where churches want to retain the property for the community, working with churches to help turn it back into social housing.

There are contentious issues regarding properties going to second homes or to buyers from outside the area; Housing Justice Cymru works with churches that want to provide affordable housing, and work with providers to enable truly affordable housing to be built for local residents. Housing Justice Cymru is currently working with 21 of the 22 local authorities. Although Housing Justice Cymru is quite small, they are developing quite a lot of units and these take a long time from when a church first approaches them to the houses being built and the keys being handed over.

##### **Work with asylum seekers**

Bonnie wanted to do something that was larger and more sustainable so, together with other organisations, applied to Comic Relief and although it took a year in the funding process the coalition recently received £600,000. This was a Change Makers

grant to work with the other organisations (Tai Pawb, Oasis, The Wallich, and the Welsh Refugee Council) in Wales to develop a pathway of accommodation for asylum seekers, making sure they were accommodated and working towards settled status.

3.A discussion time was then chaired by Darren with the following contributions from those in attendance:

**Mike Hedges MS** raised a question about a derelict church in his constituency of Swansea East.

**Bonnie** said that she was very familiar with empty churches in Swansea, as well as in other parts of Wales. She would like Welsh Government to support them in providing solutions to these as local authorities do not have the capacity to cover this. There are often complex issues involved: people sometimes don't know who owns the properties – a private developer may have bought it but then found difficulties with gravestones or Japanese knotweed. Bonnie has very good links with churches across Wales but these derelict churches are often incredibly difficult sites to unlock because each one has their own complexities. However, Housing Justice Cymru is really well placed to do the work but they would benefit from either some heritage funding or regeneration funding from Welsh Government. Bonnie says that there is some funding available but affordable housing doesn't seem to be a priority for Welsh Government but for the community itself it absolutely is. Often these properties are at the heart of a community and close to amenities so are very suitable for affordable housing

**Sam Rowlands MS** sits on the Local Government and Housing Committee in the Senedd. He mentioned how language around *appropriate* housing was now being used as well as affordable housing. Was *appropriate housing* language that Housing Justice Cymru could use?

**Bonnie** fully agreed and said that pressure needs to be constantly put on Welsh Government to make sure that the local area plans are appropriate to the needs of the community. From Housing Justice Cymru's perspective, to make sure that they themselves are doing that, they are working with 8 key social landlords around Wales whose values match theirs (e.g. in preventing eviction, providing low rent and maintaining community assets).

**Sam Rowlands MS** said that one thing that Welsh Government has brought in through the pandemic is the removal of the prioritisation of need. Although this can sound good, it is making life difficult for people who seem to have more significant needs than others to be able to get into housing. Politicians certainly need to keep an eye on that to make sure that those who do need housing are able to get it.

**Lee Gonzales (office of Joel James MS)** said that one in four people who were accommodated during the first lockdown have now gone back onto the street. Could Bonnie comment on what Housing Justice Cymru has done in these cases and what else could be done in these situations?

**Bonnie** agreed that a large number of people who were initially accommodated have now returned to rough sleeping. There are however also a large number of people who are still accommodated but whom, because of trauma and complexities, are dependent upon substances and therefore will return to the street during the day now that there is human

traffic around to beg for money. Bonnie doesn't think that the figure is actually as high as the one in four that is being portrayed as some will return to their accommodation at night. The support that Housing Justice Cymru gives, however, matches volunteers from the individuals' communities with the individuals who are experiencing rough sleeping or homelessness to find a property; crucially that person stays alongside the volunteer for at least 6 months.

**Christine Abbas (Baha'i Council for Wales)** asked Bonnie to explain the role of volunteer hosts and also asked why we were now seeing homelessness in small towns in Wales as well as in the cities.

**Bonnie** said that volunteer hosts are people who open up a spare room in their house to help an asylum seeker who cannot access benefits or work while their asylum claim is being processed.

She said that here is a significant link between early age and adult trauma and the likelihood of experiencing homelessness in one's lifetime. For some people, if trauma has occurred in the home (such as parental violence, incarceration, drug use, domestic violence), the home is not always a safe space for them and so, for some people, the accommodation that is offered to them may not be suitable for them and they may not find a closed house room being safe either. People who have had a significant amount of trauma in their lives tend to be more dependent on substances and that's completely understandable.

**Darren Millar MS** asked if there is anything that members of the Cross-Party Group on Faith can do to promote the volunteering that Bonnie was talking about.

**Gethin Rhys (Cytûn and member of Housing Justice Cymru Advisory Group)** said that Housing Justice Cymru is the churches' agency for doing this so if anyone wants to volunteer, go straight to them. Regarding Afghan refugees, Gethin understands that the Welsh Government is not looking for offers of rooms at the moment but they are looking for family houses and so if anyone has a family home that they would like to let out, the local authority would be delighted to hear from you.

**Carys Mosely (Presbyterian Church of Wales)** asked about hidden or invisible homelessness in rural areas. She said that often the church is the only community building in these rural areas and so if a church building is turned into affordable housing, this can present a tricky situation in the community then having no community space. Carys also asked about people coming out of prison.

**Bonnie** said that, in rural communities, people experiencing homelessness is often hidden and people will stay in their car, a shelter, on someone's sofa. But it does raise the question of increasing supply of housing options in those areas. That's why it's so crucial to turn those churches – if they're going to become derelict – into affordable housing for people in that community. What we can do in these opportunities is to work with the housing provider so that, if the church was the only shared space in that community and main asset, some area within that building can be retained for that community. That's really important to us as well so some of the conversions and developments that we have done in the past in towns and cities has retained a space for prayer or for community groups.

We do support people coming out of prison but it is through referrals from local authorities to make sure that their needs are not too complex for our volunteers because if there is any threat of violence to themselves or others, it wouldn't be suitable to the volunteer programme.

**David Emery (The Salvation Army and Chaplain to the Senedd)** said that the whole point of custody is to try and stabilise individuals. Chaplaincy has a huge role in prison environments to help stabilise people in many ways. When people come out, they are often left to their own devices. They have statutory support but this is not always accepted. Faith communities on the other hand can assist through initiatives such as *caring for ex-offenders* and *community chaplaincy* or bodies such as Prison Fellowship. We also need to recognise the *additionality* that faith groups bring that statutory bodies and other voluntary bodies do not. This additionality is very often the key in making people have a successful reintegration into community.

**Molly Conrad (The Catholic Church)** explained that often the Catholic Church's work in this area takes place more at a parish or diocesan level as people in their parishes know people better than anyone else. The Catholic Church has a national agency called Caritas Social Action Network

**Altaf Hussain MS** asked about homelessness and debt

**Bonnie** said that often they find in Housing Justice Cymru that people experiencing homelessness do not carry a huge amount of debt with them as they haven't had the opportunity to run up debt. The main debt they will have is often rent arrears and Housing Justice Cymru trains up volunteers to help with that so the volunteers will often meet up with benefit agencies and housing providers.

The best way for people to overcome substances is by being connected to a community and having a house to live in.

**Ainsley Griffiths (Church in Wales)** expressed his admiration for the work of Housing Justice Cymru. He asked how they were able as an organisation to call for justice in a pointed way and call, let's say, governments or local authorities to account and how the Christian foundation of Housing Justice Cymru comes into that, if at all.

Bonnie said that a good example of that would be Housing Justice Cymru's Seeking Sanctuary project with asylum seekers. Although immigration legislation remains with the Home Office, Welsh Government is committed to the Future Generations Legislation which says that we must make decisions that are collaborative, long term, based on people with lived experience and yet the way that support and funding for those seeking asylum is being administered is not recognising Future Generations legislation. Bonnie understands the Welsh Government Minister's argument that this is because of the settlement from central government and she understands the short-term funding cycle but Housing Justice Cymru continually tries to challenge back on the Welsh Government's funding of very small charities that are doing the hosting work: the Minister has said a number of times in plenary that the hosting of asylum seekers is a priority and yet the money afforded to this is only £125,000 pa.

**Darren Miller MS** asked in what ways does Welsh Government engage with Housing Justice Cymru It seems that Housing Justice Cymru has a lot to offer in terms of solutions to some of the big challenges that are out there and they can provide their services at very low cost. Could the Cross-Party Group on Faith ask Welsh Government to engage with Housing Justice Cymru in a different way perhaps?

**Bonnie** fully agreed and said that Housing Justice Cymru would be hugely grateful. Housing Justice Cymru's house building programme has delivered the same amount as a similar programme that doesn't use churches and far more than another programme. Housing Justice Cymru is funded by Nationwide and receive £200,000 for three years; the other two programmes just mentioned are funded £1,000,000 and £1,500,000 respectively, so Housing Justice Cymru is incredibly cheap.

Housing Justice Cymru is very grateful for Welsh Government support and the contact that we have but it would be great to be recognised through a more formal mechanism.

#### 4.Actions

The Cross-Party Group on Faith agreed to the following action:

- I. Darren to write to the Welsh Government Minister and ask:

*Is there a way in which Welsh Government can more formally engage with Housing Justice Cymru and partner with them in the delivery of housing needs to the people of Wales?*

- II. Jim Stewart to email the Caritas link from Molly Conrad to the group

5.Darren closed the meeting and informed the group that an email would be sent out with details of the next meeting once it had been finalised.