

Name of project/group
St James' church
Type of project
Social Action\Opening up Public Services
Location
Alnwick, North East
What was involved
<p>St James is a grade II United Reformed Church in the market town of Alnwick. In 2008, St James' church hall was sold and developed to create 9 affordable flats. The Church was converted to provide a new worship space on the upper floor and the rest of the building redeveloped to create community space with modern facilities to meet the needs of groups within the town and provide a source of income.</p> <p>The congregation made the decision on how to proceed at the outset. They had decided they wanted to sell the hall for affordable housing and make the church smaller and more accessible for the community. They supported the project throughout its duration and much of the work was done by volunteers. During the redevelopment, working groups were formed to oversee the creation of many areas of the Centre, decor, kitchen, sound, worship etc.</p> <p><i>How the project got started</i></p> <p>The church started by consulting a local estate agent about which building would provide the best accommodation for the church and what it was possible to do in the listed church. Once it was decided that the hall building would be better sold and the church converted, the church spoke to a regional housing association (ISOS) about buying the hall. Initially it was considered that this could be achieved by a barter, and they would take the hall and convert the church to the same amount of worth, using their builders and architect. However this was put on hold when it was discovered that the Charity Commissioners would not allow this, and that the hall had to be put on the open market for sale to the highest bidder.</p> <p>The main partner in developing and implementing this project was ISOS housing association. A local developer offered to purchase the hall for £300,000 and, in partnership with ISOS, use it to offset its quota share requirement of nine affordable homes on a nearby open-market development. The Charity Commission and district planners agreed the plan. Following tenure negotiations between the district council and the housing association, a resolution was reached and the developer agreed to pay the congregation's legal fees of £30,000.</p> <p><i>Support received while developing the project</i></p> <p>The project got advice from the Synod and the United Reform Church's (URC's) Listed Building Advisory Committee. The project manager, who was a member of the congregation, worked with ISOS, the architect and other sub contractors for technical advice. In the design planning and work the advice of the congregation was important.</p> <p><i>The main sources of funding</i></p> <p>Main funds came from the sale of the hall building which contributed 50% of the total redevelopment costs. Help was also received from a neighbouring URC (Embleton) that was closing and directed the Synod to give funds from their church building to St. James's. Other funds were raised from grants, fundraising and donations from the congregation.</p> <p>Phase 1, which was the main redevelopment, cost approximately £600,000. Phase 2, which is currently underway, will be another £50,000+. This is mainly exterior repairs to the building.</p>

Achievements

The initial work was started in 2002 with a hiatus. The building was completed and rededicated in 2008. The church was only closed for one year (2007-8) while the building works were being done as both projects were undertaken in parallel sharing the same builders and architect.

There are now several rooms for hire, including a large hall on the ground floor which is licensed for up to 150 people. It will also accommodate activities for children and young people, and the wooden floor makes it suitable for dancing. The new worship space's (the Sanctuary's) primary purpose is for worship, weddings and funerals, but it is also available for concerts, drama, workshops, conferences and similar events, as the furnishings are completely moveable. The building is fully accessible.

The rental income from the building has increased with the new space providing a good income for the church. Congregational numbers have been stable, and although they may not come to church services, many of the people who live in the 9 flats support the church's social events.

Future plans

The church is now trying to complete Phase 2, the exterior of the building. They are also trying to set money aside to create a maintenance fund so the building can be kept in a good state of repair. They aim to foster the continuing development of the letting space for community needs.

Lessons Learnt

At the time that the project commenced the church found that there seemed to be limited advice available, as a result much of the learning was on the job. It would have been helpful to have had advice from someone with experience of a similar project.

The church considered that One Church 100 Uses <http://www.onechurch100uses.org/cms/> would have been very useful, although it only became available as the project was finishing.

The church discovered through the project that many people had little or no idea what affordable housing really meant. It would have also been helpful to have called the street residents together to discuss the plans. This was an issue that came more to light when an application was made to the Council for a premises licence.

The church considered that red tape and regulations had sometimes acted as a constraint on what could be done with volunteers. It would also have been helpful to have had assistance in filling out grant forms.

Project contact

<http://www.urch-stjames-alnwick.org.uk/>

To read more about faith groups and affordable housing: <http://www.fiah.org.uk/>

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