

CASE STUDY / Quaker MH, Tunbridge Wells

CONTEXT

- The Friend's Meeting House in Tunbridge Wells is part of West Kent Quakers. It is situated within 10 minutes walk of the town centre, and within 5 minutes walk of the local West Kent YMCA hostel.
- Quakerism started in England in the second half of the 17th century, during the aftermath of the English Civil War; a time when many people were interested in radically reshaping religion, politics and society.
- The total number of homeless in England, according to the housing charity Shelter, is about 277,000, the equivalent of a medium-sized English city such as Brighton. Approximately one third of these are under 18.

PROJECT

- Back in 2013, we were invited by the Meeting to look at options for converting part of their Meeting House to provide for local housing need, since they were aware that they were underusing the capacity of the site.
- We were not the first partner they had approached - the site was simply not large enough to fit the amount of development that a housing association would need to achieve viability and there had been several false starts.
- In partnership with West Kent YMCA, a plan was formed to provide move-on accommodation for local young people at risk of homelessness and living at Ryder House, the local YMCA hostel.
- We developed plans and obtained planning permission for 3 shared flats housing 9 people, and a reduced Meeting hall space for the Quakers. All this was achievable via refurbishment of the existing building.
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council were able to give a grant of around 1/3 of the £750,000 costs needed to carry out the extensive renovation work. It was this support that enabled the project to be completed in 2018.

OUR ROLE

- We have taken on multiple roles which demonstrate the diverse and flexible approach we can take to supporting churches and community organisations to realise their local vision and aims:
- Project Manager throughout overseeing feasibility, planning, detailed design and construction stages.
 - We agreed a 49-year lease with West Kent Quakers and used a combination of our own charitable reserves, funds raised by the Quakers and the grant from the local authority to finance the project.
 - We have a management lease in place with West Kent YMCA who are managing the homes for their young people, and supporting them as they move on with their lives into employment and longer term housing.

IMPACT

- After a slow start, the project has been a success for all parties. Almost all of the young people who are now calling the Quaker Meeting House home are either in employment or formal training.
- After two years of operation we were seeing the first of the young people moving out into more permanent housing which was in line with the planned pathway for the YMCA's move-on programme.
- This in turn means that new tenants can move in from the YMCA hostel, freeing up essential beds for those young people who are currently homeless. They too can then benefit from their rehabilitation programme.
- Other denominations have shown an interest in the partnership model at Tunbridge Wells, and have approached us in relation to considering combined housing and community facilities on their land.
- This project also provided a Case Study for an online Guide for Churches (see <https://tinyurl.com/2wf5brkv>) looking to better use their own land following the C of E report "Coming Home", published in February 2021.