

Living with Change

Today, Stoke Heath Community Centre stands in the middle of a building site as the houses in the surrounding streets are demolished and rebuilt. As the centre plans for an uncertain future, Kate Hughes, the Centre's manager, shares what they have learnt from the rebuilding process so far.

The community centre building is owned by the local community, managed on their behalf by a small committee, and is (more or less!) self-supporting. However, the land on which the building stands is leased from the City Council. Early in the rebuilding process, the Council told us they would like to sell some of this land to Wates for building, in particular for much-needed bungalows. This meant we had to agree to give up the land and change the terms of our lease, and we would be compensated for doing so.

Be realistic

One member of the Management Committee was bitterly opposed to this and wanted us to refuse. We would lose a large chunk of our car park, and be left with very little room for expansion. But if we refused, the City Council could still impose a compulsory purchase order on us and take the land anyway – it was their land, after all. Nobody wanted to go down that lengthy and expensive path. *If there is a realistic possibility of success, fighting is worthwhile; if you are never going to win, accept reality and get the best terms you can.* The negotiations took a year, but in the end I think we got a good deal – and Wates realised that the Community Centre was a force to be reckoned with. Our responsibility as charity trustees would not allow us simply to roll over, sign on the dotted line and take the money.

Time spent on building relationships isn't wasted

Another valuable lesson from the process has been to take time to get to know the people you deal with. City Property dealt with the land negotiations, and we already knew the people involved from discussions we had with them over a rent increase. On that occasion, instead of regarding City Property as 'them', come to take more of our small resources, we welcomed them to the Centre, showed them round and talked over



Kate Hughes

Background

The process of rebuilding started almost three years ago and is due for completion in 2008. It is a partnership between the City Council, Whitefriars Housing and Wates Construction. From being 99 per cent social (council) housing, the area around Stoke Heath Community Centre will eventually be 75 per cent privately owned homes and only 25 per cent rented housing.

Stoke Heath Community Centre

provides facilities for social, leisure & educational activities.

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coffee about what we did. The result was a manageable rent increase and new friends for the Centre, which was very helpful when the land negotiations began. City Property had to get the best deal for the Council, but discussions in a friendly atmosphere are much easier than confrontation. The compensation for agreeing to change our lease was set by law, but at the end, City Property voluntarily added quite a considerable sum so that Wates could build us a new car park.

Further friendships

Over the years we have also built up a good relationship with Adult Education, who put on many classes at the Centre, run our UKOnline Centre, and have an office and part-time manager in the building. We talk to each other and sort out problems together; their manager attends our committee meetings, and we benefit from them doing health and safety checks, disability audits and so on at modest or no cost.

And we have made some good friends at Coventry Voluntary Service Council (CVSC). I feel we can always pick up the phone and ask for advice. When the land negotiations began, we felt we needed a surveyor to look after our interests. One call to CVSC put us on to a great organisation in Birmingham called Planning Aid, who in turn pointed us to a chartered surveyor who specialised in work with community groups. Steve did a wonderful job on our behalf - and then got the Council and Wates to pay his bill! I try to give something back to CVSC by being a member of their Board.

Talking to Wates has also been valuable for the Centre. Their site manager is excellent, friendly and approachable; we discuss issues amicably and make their work easier where we can. In return, the Wates workers have built us a new outdoor play area for free, and have just given us £300 from their Christmas raffle to buy more equipment for it. And although living on a building site is not easy, it has been a lot better than we anticipated.

To sum up our experience at Stoke Heath: we have had to be realistic about what is and is not achievable. Keeping our land was impossible; getting a good deal from agreeing to let it go took a lot of work but paid off handsomely in the end. And everything is much easier and far more pleasant if you take time to make friends with people, so that they know where you are coming from and are sympathetic to your aims, even if they also have their job to do.

For further information on this subject, you can contact Kate through the Stoke Heath Community Centre (see box on first page).

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Coventry Community Empowerment Network.

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