

Dales up in arms over church's property 'plunder' to plug £3m black hole

David Collins and Hannah Al-Othman

The Church of England has been accused of "unchristian behaviour" and "out and out plunder" in a dispute over a former primary school. Residents of Rathmell, a village in the Yorkshire Dales, were outraged when the Leeds diocese claimed control of property worth up to £1m. The diocese, which had a £3m black hole in its finances two years ago, says it is free to sell the school, a house on the site and surrounding land. The church is involved in other disputes in Yorkshire after shutting schools and selling sites to developers. In

another case in the Yorkshire Dales, the Leeds diocese rejected a community bid to develop affordable homes in favour of a higher offer. And a former church school site at Ingleby Arncliffe in the North York Moors may be sold for development into private houses, despite calls from the community for affordable homes to be built. The Rathmell school site, whose classrooms look out over fields of sheep and cows in countryside made famous by James Herriot's books, is being used by businesses after villagers converted its classrooms into workshops and offices. Once visited by Diana, Princess of Wales, the school was owned by a

charity after being donated by a benefactor in 1716. The church started providing money to run it in 1953. When it closed in 2017 because of falling pupil numbers, North Yorkshire county council gave the keys to the trustees, who converted it into a community hub. Its rooms are filled with start-up businesses, exercise classes, local parties and events. A legal row broke out when the Leeds diocese sent letters to the trustees disputing their new use for the site and threatening to "dispose" of the building. The diocese says the charitable assets were donated for "religious

CHRIS ECCLESTON



A view from Rathmell, whose former primary school may be sold to developers

educational purposes". It added: "The trustees of the closed school are not allowed to simply decide that they will use the assets of a charity for a different purpose, no matter how well intentioned." The diocese has applied to the government to allow the charity's assets to be held by the church. Locals fear this means the property will be sold. A villager said last week: "This is only about money I'm afraid. It's certainly not my idea of Christianity." Jacky Frankland, 60, the trust's treasurer, said: "We've turned it into a really vibrant and happy place where people can come and talk to each other. We've done takeaways between

lockdowns for people in the village and it's been beyond words how valuable it is. "I will do everything to make sure that Rathmell School Trust remains for the village in the village, as it always did, it always should." The Church of England has a national pension deficit of £50m – Leeds diocese is liable for £2m of that. The diocese owns 650 church buildings and 240 schools. Church accounts show the diocese "disposed of" buildings worth £5.4m last year. Nick Baines, Bishop of Leeds, said finances had taken a "big hit" from Covid-19. Collections and income from rent, tourism, weddings and baptisms all

stopped. The government is being urged to examine the church's practice of selling properties for the largest profit rather than for the greatest communal benefit. The Upper Dales Community Land Trust offered £150,000 for Arkengarthdale primary school to provide urgently needed affordable homes. Instead the church sold it to a private developer for £185,000. Leeds diocese said it was the church's "duty to comply with charity law" which meant it had "no choice but to sell to the highest bidder". The proceeds of any sale at Rathmell could be reinvested in other schools, it added.

Homeless to get their own hotel room for Christmas

Unable to offer rough sleepers a dormitory bed this year, the charity Crisis is to pay for a short stay and three meals a day

Emily Dugan
Social Affairs Correspondent

Homeless people in London will be treated to a two-week hotel break over Christmas, with three meals a day, virtual celebrity entertainment and even a visiting podiatrist. Charities across the country have been forced to find new ways of bringing cheer and assistance to the homeless over Christmas. Since the 1970s the charity Crisis has used public halls, conference centres and even the Millennium Dome in London to house thousands of homeless people over Christmas week. But the arrival of Covid-19 has made large-scale dormitories a public health disaster. It has paid for 517 hotel rooms to house the most vulnerable street homeless people who have no other options. The rooms were provided at a discounted rate by the London Hotel Group in four of its hotels in the capital. Ian Richards, head of Crisis Christmas, said it had already started to plan for this Christmas when the pandemic hit. "Normally, we would be running 10 centres with 4,000 guests and 12,000 volunteers. Then this came along, and we just really had to stop and reinvent the wheel from scratch. "We didn't want to do anything less; our first objective was to offer as much as we always have done in a different way." Three hot meals a day will be delivered to the rooms, and a phone app for hotel guests has been created by one of the charity's volunteers. It will be used to stream entertainment and alert guests when healthcare, advice and podiatry services are available in the hotel. A virtual Christmas quiz will be streamed on Christmas Day with appearances from celebrities, including the actors Imelda Staunton and Jonathan Pryce, and the singer Ellie Goulding. Elsewhere, Crisis will deliver

Christmas lunches and wellbeing packs to people scattered in temporary accommodation, instead of hosting meals in central locations. It has also set up a befriending service, so that volunteers can stay in touch with homeless people who might be feeling isolated.

With fewer volunteers needed to man accommodation and lunch services, the helpers it needs this year are a little different. In Birmingham, for example, it has been looking for a live musician to perform on Zoom during Christmas lunch. In Edinburgh, it is seeking telephone befrienders.

The government funded hotel places for about 15,000 homeless people in the first lockdown. Since May, however, there has been no equivalent scheme. Instead, additional money was given to councils and organisations to help rough sleepers, but charities say this has not been enough.

There is a time lag in official statistics on homelessness, but anecdotal reports suggest that rough sleeping has been increasing over the autumn.

A hostel run by the Salvation Army in Sunderland has seen a significant rise in requests for help. Christine Ritchie, who runs the Swan Lodge Lifehouse, said requests for beds had surged since the summer.

"Before, on an ordinary day, we might have one referral. At the moment, we usually have three or four, and unfortunately we can't help everybody," she said.

Planning for Christmas at the hostel has been a challenge, with the city facing tier 3 restrictions. The hostel houses 70 people and has already had to contend with cases of Covid.

Determined to keep up spirits, it is holding a virtual carol service and a virtual pantomime. It is still hosting a Christmas lunch, but will have to do it in two sittings and cannot use volunteers to help, meaning more staff will work on Christmas Day.

"Keeping everybody safe is paramount, but you still need to have fun," said Ritchie. "It's trying to keep minds occupied and the fun element because Christmas is not good for everyone. It's a hard time if they don't see their families – children especially."

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Goulding: Christmas quiz



CHICKEN LITTLE



NOAH KALINA



The photographer Noah Kalina keeps chickens at his home in New York state. Clockwise from above: a week-old Salmon Faverolle hen; Stompers, a Dark Brahma rooster; and Marcel, a speckled Sussex rooster

Fifth of households have 'illegally slow' internet

Tom Calver

One in five households is struggling with less than the legal minimum broadband speed, according to thousands of performance tests carried out by consumers.

Since March, every home and business has had a "legal right" to a "decent" internet connection of at least 10Mbps, the speed at which people can stream high-definition video and browse the web on multiple devices. If they cannot get this speed, they are legally entitled to ask for an upgrade.

Ofcom, the regulator in charge of internet connectivity, says only 2% of homes do not "have access" to 10Mbps internet.

However, data from thinkbroadband.com, which measures internet speeds from people who run its tests, suggests that up to 21% of them fail to get these speeds. It is often because they are on an expensive older contract using out-of-date technology.

Andrew Ferguson, founder of thinkbroadband.com, said: "Some providers are very bad at telling you what's available. You may have full-fibre broadband available to you,

but your provider might not sell it." The site tests "millions" of UK internet connections a year.

The need for quick and reliable broadband has been exaggerated by the coronavirus lockdowns, during which internet traffic has jumped by a third, according to the network provider Openreach.

Internet users now face a tea-time traffic jam, as schoolchildren return home and then compete with homeworkers for bandwidth. Data from UK internet exchanges suggests that lockdown usage has often

peaked between 4pm and 5pm, compared with 8pm or 9pm before the pandemic.

With family members competing for downloads, experts recommend 10Mbps for each person in a household.

It means that a family of two adults and two teenagers would need 40Mbps to get reliable, seamless connectivity – a luxury afforded to only one third of the population, according to speed test data.

Last week the government went back on Boris Johnson's £5bn election pledge to install full-fibre broadband to every

home by 2025, instead offering £1.2bn to reach 85% of homes by then.

Although more than a third of UK premises now have access to full-fibre connections, up from 9% in little over a year ago, the digital infrastructure minister Matt Warman admitted last month that the manifesto pledge was "a difficult challenge".

Under the legal entitlement to an upgrade, consumers can ask for a fibre connection if other interventions fail to bring them up to speed, except in very remote areas.

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