



**Report on feedback received on
the future of the Gospel
Standard Bethesda Fund
January 2019**



Gospel Standard Bethesda Fund

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Issued on behalf of the Trustees of the Gospel Standard Bethesda Fund

M. Ridout (Chairman)

Date February 15, 2019

Introduction

This document is a summary of the feedback received as part of an exercise undertaken by the Gospel Standard Bethesda Fund (Bethesda) Trustees to help them understand further the needs and views of those from Gospel Standard (GS) chapels and other interested parties in order to help inform their future thinking regarding the Bethesda homes.

In summary, the key points arising from this exercise are:

- the main reason for individuals coming into Bethesda is currently considered to be that the person has reached the stage where they are no longer able to cope for themselves ('a last resort')
- the reasons and/or concerns about coming into Bethesda included: the loss of independence; leaving the locality and friends; and financial, including inheritance considerations
- there was general agreement for a reasonable increase in fees. However, the need for sound financial management was also highlighted
- there was a range of views as to whether to maintain the current three homes (in their geographic locations) or to have one purpose-built home. Those who felt the current three homes to be appropriate were concerned about the impact of home closures on the accessibility to the remaining homes. Views were also expressed regarding the option of a purpose-built home; there was no clear consensus as to where the location of the one home should be
- suggestions were also made regarding setting up and providing a home care service and sheltered accommodation
- views were expressed regarding increasing the occupation levels of Bethesda through considering how others of similar principles could be accepted into the Homes
- additionally, views were also expressed about the lack of individuals from Gospel Standard chapels wishing to work in Bethesda.

The Bethesda Trustees in seeking and determining, in the fear of the Lord, the future for the Bethesda homes were encouraged by comments received expressing concern for them in their role and responsibilities. In particular, the following letter and comments illustrate these encouragements.

"December 2017

To the Bethesda Trustees

Having read your written comments on the situation with Bethesda we believe we have been enabled to give it our prayerful consideration. There is one certain thing, the Lord has a perfect will for Bethesda. May all the trustees be favoured with the revealing of his will and be able to go forward in humble dependence on him.

The Lord be with you all.

‘Jehovah Jireh’

“Lastly, it is a relief to know that the Committee desire to maintain the ethos and original purpose of the homes – may this ever be the case. I have felt for some time that the Lord has a controversy with the denomination and Bethesda. “Is there not a cause?” It would be good to have prayer meetings about the situation in the denomination and Bethesda and to seek to know wherein we are wrong and grieving Almighty God. Whether or not these should be local or in a particular place I do not know but it is sad that, generally speaking, we do not seem to come together often to pray about the serious decline and state we are in other than at the AGM. It is easy to say that “it is a day of small things” or “will He find faith on the earth” but we should not rest in such matters but give ourselves to prayer as enabled. I hope the Committee do this but the whole denomination needs to be called to prayer on these matters and if we are “too busy” to attend such a meeting, then it is hardly to be wondered at that the Lord is not blessing as in days past. May we each ask our self where am I grieving the Holy Spirit and thereby causing the Lord’s withdrawal?”

“I do not feel able to suggest alternatives that could be offered to the elderly in our congregations. However, I am glad that the Committee realises that Bethesda’s prime concern should be to meet the needs of the elderly, rather than the elderly being a means of keeping the Bethesda homes going.”

“May He who fed Elijah by the means of ravens, who kept the oil and meal flowing for the widow woman and raised her son from the dead (and can raise Bethesda from its seeming decline!) be pleased to appear for you as a committee and us as a denomination.”

“May the Lord graciously direct each of the Bethesda Trustees in these difficult matters. What a mercy it is to be really brought to that place in Psalm 107 – “...at their wits end” (margin: ‘all their wisdom is swallowed up’). That makes room for the gracious encouragement and admonition of James 1 v5,6: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.”

“Above all, what we need in this land is a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit to swell the present congregations with believers and to form new congregations. If that were the will of God, Bethesda would have quite different and more pleasant issues to face!”

“We should not lose sight of the truth that when each of the Bethesda Homes opened, it was a venture of faith upon the Lord who has said “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of hosts.” (Hag 2:8) When His people have need, His goodness will find out a way. The present arrangements, with significant changes put in place appears to me to be the right way forward for the next ten years (DV).”

May the Lord grant faith to believe that with God nothing is impossible and to show us (the Bethesda Trustees) the way that He will have us to go in determining the future of the Bethesda homes.

Background

In November 2017, the Bethesda Trustees undertook a consultation exercise to gain feedback from its subscribers and other interested parties regarding their thoughts on the issues facing Bethesda. The purpose of the exercise was to help inform the future thinking of the Bethesda Trustees on the many challenges they face in sustaining the provision of the Bethesda homes to churches on the GS list.

A paper was prepared and distributed that set out the background to the consultation and the challenges faced by Bethesda, which were identified as:

- Maintaining the distinct identity of Bethesda in an age of compromise and an increasing secular society.
- Maintaining the financial viability of Bethesda to ensure levels of care and support are sufficient to meet the needs of residents.
- Ensuring Bethesda's physical assets (e.g. buildings, equipment) are fit for purpose.
- Responding to and providing high levels of care for the increasing range of residents' needs in the Bethesda homes.
- Recruiting staff who are in sympathy with the ethos of Bethesda. (Another impact of the reduction in the congregations within Gospel Standard chapels has been the availability of young people willing to pursue a career within Bethesda.)

These challenges remain and the trustees realise more and more the need for wisdom to manage the affairs of Bethesda, both in the fear of the Lord and being responsive to the (current and future) needs of those eligible to come into Bethesda.

In March 2018, the Bethesda Trustees provided a summary of the views that have been expressed in the consultation responses. It was hoped that there may have been a timelier follow-up to this interim reporting however circumstances have prevented this. Sadly, this delay may have caused some concerns amongst those who had replied as to what had happened to their responses.

There were 114 responses to the consultation from both subscribers and other interested parties. The responses were anonymized and analysed according to the broad headings of the consultation. Where a theme emerged, for example eligibility criteria, then this was added to the analysis.

At the outset, although differing views were expressed about the way forward for Bethesda, there was an overwhelming recognition of the quality of the care provided by the Bethesda homes as illustrated by the following comments "... more recently other relatives have been cared for in their last days, and in respite. All three homes are to be commended in the care of residents and the excellent dedication of the staff" and "I have visited other homes, but none measure up to the quality of care and especially the spiritual atmosphere in Bethesda. Ordinarily care homes always leave me feeling distressed.... I was sure that in my old age I would wish to be in such an environment (Bethesda)".

Reasons for coming into Bethesda

The reasons identified for coming into a Bethesda home can be summed up as “a last resort”; “unable to manage/continue living at home”; and “could no longer cope”. These reasons are understandable as independent living is easier today with mobility aids/devices and technology together with the local authority emphasis being on supporting people in their own homes. Linked to these reasons are family and chapel ties and concerns over the distance a Bethesda home may be from relatives and friends. Although loneliness may have been a reason for coming into Bethesda previously, the lack of being able to live independently appears to be the key driver from the responses received.

Allied to the views expressed relating to the desire for independent living, comments were made relating on how well/suitable the facilities and accommodation available in Bethesda are in meeting the expectation and needs of older people today.

The downside of Bethesda being seen as a last resort is that when an individual does need to come into a home, the complexity of their care needs may prevent this. Thankfully, due to the close working relationships with health and social care professionals, it has been possible for Bethesda to work with them and support residents who develop complex support needs and/or dementia and thereby allow them to remain in Bethesda. Although Bethesda may be a last resort it is important that it is not considered as a last-minute option.

The following observations (although not exhaustive) provide a representation of views expressed regarding coming into Bethesda. They also reflect the debates and discussion of the Bethesda Trustees in finding a way forward:

“The factors preventing eligible residents coming into the homes:

- *The desire of their families to care for them in their own homes*
- *A desire to leave an inheritance for their children (Proverbs 13 v 22) that might otherwise be consumed by residential care fees*
- *The institutional nature of the care sector, which is common to Bethesda too. Human nature loves independence.*
- *The limited number of homes and their respective locations may not suit those relatives living at a distance*
- *The size, facilities and access to the rooms, particularly in the two older homes*
- *The age and condition of the rooms and facilities offered.”*

“Before I entered the necessarily regimented atmosphere of a care home, I would have to be convinced I could not care for myself. Observing many others who have gone into the homes, I notice that those that settle the best are those that have had a few, two week respite visits first. This gets them used to the home, and gives them a contrast when they go back home, in between respites. If they go straight in sometimes they are left feeling “I could have coped at home.”

“In my opinion I think that the main reason that prevents eligible residents coming into Bethesda is that they do not want to give up having a home of their own unless they have too, also they may be worried that they will not have enough money to pay for their care.”

“In my case, it weakens the local church, perhaps seriously. I don't know about other people. If our cause were to close, I should think it a possible course of action.”

“People generally enjoy better health and fitness into older age (and longer life expectancy) than they did when Bethesda was conceived, so they are able to look after themselves until a much later stage of life. The strong policy emphasis on “Care in the Community” over the last 20 years or so has compounded this.”

“Often eligible residents are unwilling to leave their own chapel or pastor, particularly where it is very small. Or, sadly, there may be an antipathy towards the church or pastor most closely connected with the particular Bethesda Home.”

“Full residency inevitably results in some loss of independence and often also moving far from family, friends and Chapel with which they have been associated for many years. This would be made worse if more homes were closed.”

“A major factor in not coming into Bethesda or any home would probably be reluctance to give up independence. People wish to stay at home for as long as possible in their own surroundings with friends, neighbours and family nearby. The familiarity of routine is important, and this control is lost once in care. Also, the turmoil of selling a property, clearing belongings to live effectively in one room. There is a psychological barrier to cross because this move would surely emphasise, they are coming to the end of their days. Sadly, people still wish to give their money to their family and not spend it on their care. (This needs an enormous culture shift and although not relevant to discuss here the message needs to be put out there that this is the way the world/economy is. I have seen too many people receive inadequate or inappropriate care due to this attitude and / or family pressure.) If people are not self-funding then the care provision of choice is home care, often by the time people move into a care home they then require nursing care. For people who choose not to go into a Bethesda Home this could be due to the home not being able to meet assessed needs, such as nursing care. People may not live in an area near a Bethesda Home and do not wish to leave their family/friends/community support networks. There may be another home, nearer the person (or not) which is deemed to be better. Better reputation, good care, activities, garden, access to local shops / community etc.”

“At the moment Bethesda is a real Old Peoples Home with rooms literally for residents to sleep in and further they are dependent for the rest of their needs from staff.”

“There is a trend amongst doctors and other professionals to encourage older people to stay at home as long as possible. In my opinion, while older people should not be moved out of their homes while they are able to cope with support, the real reasons for the ideology amongst professionals for the “stay in your own home” philosophy are to save the state money. In my mother's case I had to arrange for her to enter the home based on my own judgement, ignoring the advice of her GP and the mood music coming from the Council and others. Cost is also a factor which makes relatives hesitate.”

What emerges from the comments received is that there is still a need for a provision that meets the needs of the Lord's aged people. In meeting these needs, the Bethesda Trustees will need to consider addressing the concerns around not eroding the individual's independence. This will require an approach to creating an environment where Bethesda is not perceived as a 'last resort'. At the same time, Bethesda needs to ensure that its provision is responsive to those requiring complex care and/or are no longer able to cope for themselves.

Evaluating the options

Four options were set out in the document seeking the views and opinions of those with an interest in Bethesda, these were:

Option 1 Maintain the status quo and continue with the existing approach with the continued drain on reserves

Option 2 Maintain the status quo and continue with the existing approach together with seeking to increase significantly, over three years, the fees to stabilise the current financial position

Option 3 Maintain the existing three homes alongside a significant financial investment in refurbishment to ensure facilities are fit for purpose in meeting future needs

Option 4 Consolidate (relocate) the existing three homes into one home to realise the economy of scale that this would bring

These options had been developed as a result of the debate and discussion by the Bethesda Trustees that had been articulated in the meetings in seeking the future direction of Bethesda.

In summary, 106 of the 114 respondents commented on the options and the responses can be summarised as:

Option	Responses	Comment
Option 1	0	
Option 2	44	
Option 3	24	
Option 4	38	Of the 38 responses 12 identified central England as a preferred location, 10 south east England, and 16 did not indicate any preference
Total	106	Although the intention was not to hold a ballot, the majority of respondents (68) preferred keeping three homes, in some form, as set out in Options 2 and 3

As might be expected, there were a range of views expressed and many of the thoughts that were received demonstrated the challenge of finding an appropriate way forward for Bethesda.

In addition, there is a great deal of emotional investment and attachment to Bethesda and in particular the local homes in the vicinities of the different chapels. This is understood and for some the Bethesda homes are integral part of their Christian life. The challenge of making decisions relating to Bethesda is being objective and, at the same time, sensitive to the needs and views of those that the trustees seek to serve. Also, it is realised that any future decisions will not please everyone; it is important that these decisions are made in the fear of the Lord and that help might be given to be submissive to His will.

The following anonymized comments have been included to illustrate the views expressed and perhaps, more importantly expressing the challenges faced:

"I can say that during considerable discussions over several years it was never considered that a home of less than about 70-80 rooms was financially viable.

In all instances, to allow for modern standards to be integrated into the build it was never felt viable to refurbish whole care homes (of around 30 rooms) but always to building new.

On the other hand, wings of say 10-15 rooms have been refurbished successfully. This generally meant the knocking of two rooms into one to provide showering facilities in each room, making good and full redecorate. I would also say that a combination of maintaining existing homes with increased fees, but also, investing in refurbishment and provision of extra facilities where appropriate to ensure the homes continue to be fit for purpose both now and in meeting future needs. The benefits of having more than one home is that it gives potential residents the choice of having one nearer to their family, or it gives a choice of ministers/chapels, and smaller homes have a more "homely" feel than one large one. By retaining 3 smaller homes spread geographically the burden of interest and support is spread around a greater number of chapels."

"The size of the rooms could be off-putting and I wonder if this could be addressed by knocking two rooms into one (perhaps 8 of the bedrooms into 4) in the larger homes, thus making them much roomier, with perhaps a designated sitting area and this would make the residents feel as if they have their own living space, and not just a bedroom. The en-suite could be made larger and updated and it would be like a mini-flat but still within the Home so they would continue to eat all their meals and receive all the usual care given to the residents. The resident could bring quite a bit more of their own furniture as I think the minimal space can be difficult for them, and would feel the step between their own home and residential care was an easier one to take as they wouldn't be giving up their personal living space completely. Obviously these rooms would attract a higher fee. When we have visited residents in their own rooms, we feel that sitting on the bed because there is not enough space for more chairs is rather awkward. Someone who used to have a fairly senior position in one of the homes did say to me that if each bedroom had a shower area or wet room as an en suite it would then be possible to give each resident a shower each day, which some would very much benefit from."

"It is going to be nigh on impossible to place the home in an area that suits everyone, especially the families. Once residents have made the big decision to leave their former chapel or residence they become resigned to the fact that their lives will never be the same again and as a consequence it is not a matter of overriding concern to them where their new home is."

"Maintain the status quo, but reluctantly increasing fees, but going forward in faith, trusting in legacies etc., and perhaps with a greater commitment from some of the larger churches."

"Regarding the suggestion of one home - nice for those living nearby!"

"I accept that the objective of Bethesda in the past has been local provision, but this approach is becoming less sustainable with passing time. The model suggested above would inevitably focus Bethesda into one location, which would create some very sensitive "politics" and would need great wisdom to handle. However, I am sure that the denomination could be brought along if the benefits of such an approach were communicated effectively and the "politics" handled very sensitively. Surely people would see that a long-term sustainable, and indeed, improved service provision, albeit in one location, is a far better proposition than the demise of Bethesda entirely, which I fear may be the case if it continues on a "residential care only" basis in three locations?"

“To buy land, then build a large purpose designed home would be exceedingly expensive even before staffing is considered. It seems to be rather a waste of money when the denomination is in decline. Again, demolition of Harpenden and rebuild would be extremely expensive and there would be a huge upheaval in rehoming current residents. Indeed, some who are especially elderly or may have mental health issues may be unable to cope with such an upheaval. I cannot see how such a situation would be cost effective. So I prefer the maintaining of the status quo but gradually increasing charges as outlined. When the funding has been increased, then I feel the three homes should be maintained for five years (or as long as is necessary to be able to say if that was a successful decision) and then the situation reviewed.”

“Maintaining three (relatively small) homes is surely a major issue. Looking at commercial homes they are housing many more residents and we wonder what the minimum, commercially viable, number of residents is estimated to be”

“A single home for say 60 residents would surely be far more cost effective. This suggestion, of course, is fraught with difficulty. The closure of the Tunbridge Wells home shows the high feelings that are raised when a home is closed. Nevertheless, if we were starting now with potentially 60 residents we think you would seriously consider a single location. The questions that arise are where would it be built? Would people actually be prepared to move long distances from their current areas where friends and families may still live? We do need to accept though, that travelling has become remarkably easier since Bethesda was founded. Even though we grumble about hold-ups on the motorways we can now travel almost anywhere in England within a few hours.”

“With regards to consolidating the three homes into one, this would make the most financial sense but would definitely not work for our denomination as the three homes at present serve areas in England where local eligible residents are concentrated. This reflects on the number of our chapels in these areas who help to provide the spiritual care as well as practical help, which would be very difficult to provide otherwise. We know of residents that would have gone into a pilgrim home or worldly home locally rather than travel two hours to get to Bethesda. This would also apply to relatives of residents too. Therefore, to consolidate all three homes would further exacerbate the problem of occupancy.”

“The ideal situation to us would be to keep the three homes open and as occupancy is the main issue we see no other option other than to offer care for other Protestant Christians. Although we appreciate this would be an extremely hard thing to do and it saddens us to write this, if Bethesda still provided the same spiritual care then standards shouldn't have to be compromised.”

“The suggestion of relocating to a single location:

If Bethesda was starting its activities with a 'fresh sheet of paper', this would be a sensible option. Larger homes are more economic to run. It is therefore worth careful and prayerful consideration. My sense is that it is probably too late for Bethesda to take this option. At the very least, it is a high risk. Some arguments against: (a) the emotional upheaval and upset of moving frail older people; (b) potential loss of voluntary/charitable income, which is likely if supporters become disillusioned at closure of homes (as was evidenced with the closure of Tunbridge Wells); (c) lower demand on services overall as our older friends look for other care homes in their vicinity or stay in their own homes longer.”

“As our aged people are not entering the Homes until they are at advanced age or in severe infirmity, it is the Bethesda high standard of care that they need, rather than larger rooms/more up to date facilities etc. The homes already are fully equipped with specialist hoists/baths/showers etc. No doubt improvements in such equipment are continually being

developed, but such changes should not involve major building work. 'Make do and mend' is often the answer in an economically challenging time."

"At present, closure of a home would be clearly unjustified, as the homes all have good occupancy levels. That can quickly change both ways, as has been seen many times over the years. If Bethesda went down to one large home, many of the old people from the chapels would choose to be cared for in their homes, or in a local care home. The atmosphere in Bethesda Homes is still very different from other non-Christian Homes, but sadly the difference is not as great as it once was."

"Consolidation of the provision currently made at the three homes, onto one site, would be likely to decrease occupancy and, therefore, decrease the number of people that Bethesda can provide care for. This is because residents do not like to move far from their home area."

"It would be sad if consolidation were to mean that residents were even further removed from their loved ones, but one cannot help feeling that, with the decline in congregations, it will be necessary to consolidate more in the future, if the world continues."

"If only a single home, narrow parochial interest would hopefully not prevail. Position either in the south midlands or south-east. Existing site sale values, and size / cost of possible new sites, together with the logistics of handling present residency, would be some of the critical factors."

Trustees' Postscript:

Since this exercise was carried out, there have been a number of deaths in the Bethesda homes that have impacted on occupancy levels. In the case of Brighton occupancy has remained similar whilst at the Harpenden and Studley homes there has been a decline in occupancy.

Low occupancy has two major impacts, the first is the decrease in income and the second is on the ambience/atmosphere of the homes. Respite care does help to take up some of the spare capacity in the homes, however, it does not generate the same income as full-time occupancy (as the fee rate is lower).

The following table provides data on the occupancy levels of January 1, 2018 and January 1, 2019.

Home	Total Capacity	1 st Jan. 2018		1 st Jan. 2019		Deaths in 2018
		Residents	% Occup.	Residents	% Occup.	
Brighton	22	17	77%	16	73%	4
Harpenden	25	21	84%	13	52%	9
Studley	13	10	77%	7	54%	7
Total	60	48	80%	36	60%	20

Bethesda has three levels of care (ordinary, intermediate, and high) depending on the needs of the resident. Overall, across the homes, there has been a change in the level and type of need provided. This is shown in the table below and illustrates the point regarding the move towards increased care needs of residents within Bethesda.

	Percentage different care rates					
	January 2018			January 2019		
Home	Ordinary	Intermed.	High	Ordinary	Intermed.	High
Brighton	59%	18%	23%	62%	25%	13%
Harpenden	65%	30%	5%	15%	54%	31%
Studley	70%	20%	10%	75%	12%	13%
Overall	64%	23%	13%	49%	32%	19%

The challenge for the Bethesda Trustees is to determine, prayerfully and in the fear of the Lord, what is right for Bethesda now and in the future. Although the desire to maintain the ethos of Bethesda remains paramount, the future shape of Bethesda may not be the same as in the past.

Home Care Service

Comments were received as to whether Bethesda should consider the provision of a Home Care Service.

The following comments reflect the sentiments behind this suggestion:

"In areas which are not close to a home care, in the community care by Christian carers could be introduced. It might be possible to set up an agency so that other denominations could also be served. Profits from this could help finance the homes."

"Accept the contemporary situation, and extend the Society's objects (via Charity Commission) to direct substantial effort and funds to supply any real needs of Gospel Standard aged church members staying in their local communities."

"In areas where there is no Home to provide a Home Care Service - with Bethesda as the Agency - and maybe look into linking private homes to the relay system of the local chapel - (I don't know how practical this would be - even if this was funded by the client but just facilitated by Bethesda)."

"In areas where there is no Home and Home Care was provided - the Home Support Groups would be invaluable in visiting these people and providing them with practical and emotional/spiritual support)."

"Also, would it help the funds if a extra service delivered by Bethesda was started up of domiciliary carers. one per region per day on a set round. Going to homes caring for those who don't need the full package of care. I am sure that this service would be used even if it was a little more than other rates, if it was a carer that people recognized as one of those of our denomination. I think people may prefer this to worldly people coming into their homes to care."

"Bethesda could develop into more of a home care service, with care taking place within the client's home. This would be a community based endeavour rather than residential, with employees in various areas of the country."

"... Bethesda could also set up and pay local staff to give support to the aged before they leave their own homes. This was an original aim of the Fund in the 1940's and was promised to the Northern Churches when Haydock closed. Bathing, shopping, cleaning and regular visits would I am sure be warmly welcomed by many aged friends."

Interestingly, these thoughts resonate with the feedback relating to people wishing to stay in their own homes and, as helped, to attend their local chapel and remain in their neighbourhood/community.

Although at first sight, the proposal may seem to be outside of the current structure of Bethesda, the underlying premise of meeting the needs of the Lord's aged people does align with Bethesda's ethos.

At this stage, further thought and investigation would be needed as to what such a service might look like and whether it is feasible and viable.

Sheltered accommodation

There were also views expressed around developing a sheltered accommodation complex with different types of service available to meet the needs of those using the facilities.

The following extracts reflect these views:

“Could a low cost supported housing or extra care scheme be developed alongside one or two of the retained Bethesda Care Homes? The home would be efficiently design 1 or 2 bedroom flats meeting the Nationally Described Space Standards (NDSS) and with communal facilities. These could be purchased on lease or rented from the Bethesda Fund (Please note I am thinking of something different to the large luxury flats being developed at). i.e. a combined care home with adjacent efficiently designed over 55's supported living.”

“Perhaps some warden assisted flatlets in more local areas rather than concentrating in a few or only one location. Not many elderly people are willing to relocate miles to a home. The local option would require less staffing and specialist equipment at the early stages of leaving their existing homes.”

“Unless that is the Bethesda Fund Committee could see their way forward to converting one or more of the homes into truly sheltered accommodation, warden controlled, and provide increasing support for the residents as they grow more needy. This does seem to be the way the next generation are looking towards, and, also, importantly seems to have local and national government support as opposed to their somewhat reluctant support for care homes such as Bethesda. This is probably the best way forward although I see it is not mentioned as an option.”

“The clear present and foreseeable need is residential high-dependency care on-hand 24 hours a day. The specialist care needed by Dementia sufferers is an increasing issue that I know Bethesda is seeking to address in the homes.”

“Increasingly, as the population ages, and “Care in the Community” provides for these people to remain in their homes for longer, the need for higher dependency provision will only increase, particularly nursing care and dementia care, and the need for traditional residential care will diminish. It would seem that the demand for sheltered accommodation is also increasing, as people look for a “phasing-into” long term care. In the secular market, it is increasingly evident that small, traditional residential-only homes are going out of business rapidly, and the future is larger “care villages” that can provide warden-assisted accommodation, along with residential, nursing and dementia care, all under one roof, with the economies of scale which such a model brings.”

“The immediate future for all health and social care providers will be difficult at best. There are ever increasing challenges, increasing regulation, financial constraints, recruitment and retention of staff and less people entering residential care. If the decision to retain the homes or continue some sort of care provision this needs to be a long term commitment. People want to stay at home and retain their independence for as long as possible. In an ideal world care provision would include, domiciliary care provided in people's own homes; extra care housing where people could live as independent or as dependant life as they needed/required. These are favoured by funding authorities and avoid the expense of maintaining properties as people are responsible for their own homes / tenancies. There would also be a care home on the same site as the extra care housing. People will always need 24 hour care and some may chose this option. People can move into extra care housing before they need care. This enables them to become familiar with and develop their own friendships / support

systems both inside and outside the care environment. This would especially be beneficial to people who were living with dementia rather than moving them to a strange and alien environment when the home situation breaks down. With good training and good governance staff could work flexibly across all sites.”

Any development of this nature would require further investigation in view of the capital investment and challenge of finding a suitable location(s) that would be attractive enough for individuals to relocate to. In view of the decline in the numbers attending GS chapels, the question arises as to whether there would be sufficient numbers of occupants to sustain this type of provision, if it were made available.

Eligibility

Although feedback on Bethesda's eligibility criteria was not sought directly, a number of respondents identified this as an area for consideration. The views expressed were, from the comments made, predicated on a view that if the number of GS adherents are in decline then could there be a review/reconsideration of the current admissions criteria.

The following comments are a reflection of the views expressed relating to Bethesda's eligibility criteria:

"Sadly as our denomination has shrunk it is probably not sustainable to only take people from our own denomination. Empty rooms are not efficient in any way. Could it not be possible to run the homes on the basis that people that attend GS chapels have the first refusal on any vacant places and then after this people from other places of worship are allowed but with a strict entry condition, that they must agree to and keep. Whilst this is not preferred by many, surely this is better than the homes closing and our people having to go into secular homes."

"We are thankful that the Bethesda have exercised wise discretion allowing residency in the homes to those that do not come from current Gospel Standard Churches. One can think of others that have been supporters, but now find themselves in different situations, yet support our position and would be worthy residents. If applicants give a satisfactory testimony and are willing to accept the 'Bethesda rules & ethos' surely this could be acceptable to enable the continuance of the homes without compromise.

It may also be worthy of consideration if Bethesda should, if necessary, approach the Charity Commission to broaden its charitable activities to include other like-minded Strict and Particular Baptist churches, and others. We are thankful that regular attenders have a place in our homes."

"Our dwindling denomination, does not help, so not providing the residents to fill Bethesda homes. The answer could be to broaden the terms of acceptance, e.g. to have other 'Christian' persons from other reformed churches. I fear, as the Committee would, that the atmosphere of the Bethesda homes would change and not for the better."

"Open up the eligibility criteria for entering Bethesda. This is a difficult point. The wonderful and unique thing about Bethesda is the way in which it has served our group of churches. But it seems that the time has come when the choice is not whether to open up the care homes to those who are not attending Gospel Standard Strict Baptist Chapels; rather, it is whether we wish Bethesda to survive at all. In this context, the decision becomes much easier - half-empty care homes are simply not sustainable. Of course, in opening up to the Lord's people who are not attending our chapels, it would be very important to lay down clear principles that would need to be agreed to in advance of becoming a resident."

The GS Bethesda homes arose from a concern identified in 1944, by the Committee of the Gospel Standard Aid and Poor Relief Societies, about the elderly in GS chapels, who were no longer able to care for themselves, being compelled to spend their last days in the uncongenial atmosphere of unsuitable old people's homes. In 1951, Mr S F Paul, regarding Bethesda, stated:

"in the case of the Lord's people, who have been separated in heart and spirit from the 'the world which lieth in wickedness', it may well be an added affliction to be taken from their homes and compelled to live with others who have no fear of God before their eyes; and the worldly influence and atmosphere of the public home would be distressing to them in their latter days. It was with an endeavour to remedy this that the Committee of the Gospel Standard Societies conceived the idea of

establishing homes for the aged and infirm connected with our Gospel Standard causes of truth, so that they might be favoured in their declining days or times of affliction, to dwell with those who are like-minded with themselves, and to be cared for in a spiritual as well as a home-like atmosphere.”

The position set out in this statement, of providing accommodation and personal care and support for the elderly, in a spiritual as well as a home-like atmosphere, who are members of Gospel Standard Strict and Particular Baptist chapels, or who regularly attend Gospel Standard chapels, is one that the Bethesda Trustees seek continually to maintain and uphold.

The comments highlighted the importance of maintaining Bethesda’s distinctive position/ethos. This is achieved through admissions criteria relating to membership and/or attendance at a GS chapel and provision is made for exceptional circumstances. In addition, anyone wishing to come into Bethesda must sign their unequivocal agreement to the GS articles of faith.

The GS articles of faith set out the biblical basis for the distinctive position of the GS churches relating to the doctrinally and experimental truths believed among them together with the conduct and walk of the Lord’s people and their separation, in love to the Lord Jesus, from those things that are dishonouring to His name.

When considering exceptional cases, in the fear of the Lord, the Bethesda Trustees, where appropriate, seek to show compassion and at the same time not to compromise the Bethesda ethos and distinctive position. This at times is not easy but foremost is the consideration of the integrity of Bethesda in fulfilling its charitable purpose.

In July 2018, the Bethesda Trustees addressed the question of eligibility criteria and it was resolved to maintain the current position as stated in Gospel Standard Bethesda Fund Rules of Administration January 2016:

“When vacancies exist in the Homes or Flatlets which cannot be filled by persons who are members of or regular attenders at a Gospel Standard chapel, the Bethesda Fund Committee may, in exceptional circumstances, admit persons who are not so qualified in the following circumstances:

a) Each case will be considered carefully in the light of the circumstances of the case and the testimony of the applicant.

b) The applicant must unequivocally signify agreement to the Gospel Standard articles of faith whatever other circumstances there are.

c) The Bethesda Committee will look sympathetically at any application from the person who was already at an advanced age at the time the Chapel was removed from the list of Gospel Standard churches, provided the above criteria are met.”

Staffing and careers

There was an acknowledgement in the responses of the need to encourage, in particular, young people from GS chapels to work in the Bethesda Homes.

In considering this feedback, the question arises as to from where this encouragement should come. Bethesda could promote further what it is to work in its homes and the training and opportunities available. Bethesda, however, is not the first point of influence in a young person's career choice.

Working in Bethesda is a vocation (calling) for those who wish to serve the elderly and as with any calling there may be a need for sacrifice. It is also acknowledged that not everyone has the skills set, ability and aptitude to work as a carer and/or in supervisory/managerial roles.

Bethesda endeavours to offer comparable salaries and pay scales and invests in the training of its staff.

Perhaps the other factor in the equation is the number of young people available to work in Bethesda (both in terms of numbers and locality).

One reassuring point that came through the responses was the acknowledgement of the quality and level of care provided by all staff within the homes.

As mentioned, Bethesda can provide employment opportunities and promote these. The motivation to pursue and take up these opportunities needs to come from the individual with, as appropriate, encouragement from those close to them.

Finance

There was a recognition, in the responses received, of the financial challenges facing Bethesda.

At an operational level, feedback focused on the need for Bethesda to develop a "cost conscious culture" based on the approach of "if you look after the pennies, the pounds will look after themselves". The importance of budgetary control and responsible use of budgetary allocations is one that is fostered within Bethesda. More, however, can be done to cultivate this approach throughout the organisation and Bethesda is, currently, looking at how to improve further its budgetary control and management accounting.

In managing Bethesda's budgets, one of the key influences in determining income is the level of occupancy. If occupancy decreases, then savings in areas of direct costs such as food can be made. The challenge is in indirect/overhead costs such as staffing; as there are certain minimum levels of staffing that have to be maintained in order to meet statutory requirements together with ensuring the well-being of the residents. In addition, in managing staffing costs there is not only the financial considerations but the impact on individuals.

At a tactical and strategic level, comments were made regarding funding and raising additional income. There was a general feeling that if Bethesda were able to identify a particular project then individuals would be inclined to support this. Allied to this was a view that Bethesda does need to improve its communication so that people are aware of its needs and the reason for this.

Although there was a consensus regarding the need for fees to be proportionate with the service offered and comparable to the 'marketplace', there was a feeling that any increase in fees should be done in an accountable way and the impact on the ability of residents to fund themselves considered. This latter point is an important one and the Bethesda Underfunded Residents Fund provides financial support to make up any shortfall in a resident's ability to meet their fees.

A further observation was the level of subscriptions should be reviewed and this is summed up by the following comments:

"How many subscribers who elected to pay their subscription by Bankers Order at the start in 2007 have not increased the amount since? (I am one of them!) These things tend to go on from year to year unnoticed. Likewise, could the minimum fee of £5 be substantially increased? What does £5 buy these days?"

"I confess I am as guilty as others, but I feel that a subscription of £50 at least is incumbent on all subscribers."

The trustees will also look at this aspect in their further consideration of the issues

Involvement and communication

Feedback was received relating to encouraging the congregations of more chapels to become involved with Bethesda and individuals to visit and likewise become involved in the homes.

An important aspect of the work of Bethesda are the Home Support Groups and volunteers who give their time freely to assist in various ways from helping with activities, visiting residents and being involved in making (physical) improvements to the homes. The role of the Home Support Groups and individuals cannot be underestimated, and Bethesda would encourage anyone who may wish to become involved in the activities of the homes to make contact with the local home manager.

Certainly, from the feedback received, Bethesda does recognise the need to build on its existing communication channels and seek additional ways to enhance this.

Finally

The following salutary comment puts into perspective the need to care for the Lord's aged people:

"With the current existing rise and promotion in euthanasia, homosexuality and general anti-Christian sentiment and reasoning, the need for excellent Christian care and nursing homes based on Biblical principles will only be more and more desired by the Lord's people as the years pass on."

The challenge for Bethesda is to provide services and facilities that maintains its ethos yet meet the needs of potential users in the perilous times in which we live.

The following sentiment was expressed in the feedback: *"Above all may we all be drawn by the Spirit to pray for the homes"*. This is very searching; do we have an earnest spirit of prayer for Bethesda that the Lord might grant a continuing of Bethesda (in whatever form) to the honour and glory of His name for future generations?