

Whittingham Parish Council
St John's Church Project - CONCEPT 1
07 October 2023

INTRODUCTION

Whittingham Parish Council is seeking ways to save St John's church and bring it back into community use. This process is at an early stage and the council is looking to develop an overarching vision for the project that can be used to shape the future direction.

The Council has developed this concept paper for this purpose and the paper was formally adopted by the council as an initial statement of its aims at its September 2023 meeting.

Comments and alternative concept papers are welcome.

1. THE CONCEPT

- St John's sits on the site of the old Whittingham psychiatric hospital which opened in 1873 and closed in 1995.
- It would be appropriate to reflect the history of the site and redevelop the church as a health and well-being community hub with particular emphasis on the mental well-being of visitors in its broadest sense.

2. KEY ELEMENTS

There are a number of key elements to the concept:

- The regenerated site should feel like an oasis, somewhere for people to go where they can escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life and leave feeling mentally and socially nourished.
- The site should play a central role in creating a sense of community for the area. By this we mean:
 - It should be a place where people feel immediately welcome.
 - It should be a place where people can connect with other locals and people of similar interests.
 - It should be a place where people can learn and grow.
 - It should give people a sense of 'knowing' the area and a sense of belonging.
 - People should notice if regulars are struggling or don't turn up - and care enough to do something about it.
 - Without coming across as 'worthy' it should be a place where people can come together and contribute to the greater local good in the short and longer term.
- Regenerating the site will be expensive but we want to do this in a way that creates a national exemplar for putting heart back into the local community.
 - We will find a way of funding the regeneration from fund raising, grants, and other means.
 - The solution will need to be financially self-sustaining, generating an income to cover costs with sufficient additional income to ensure the long term sustainability of the site.
 - Ideally, the redevelopment will include a built-in safety net of enabling the building to be repurposed easily in the future should the world move on. This is in order to ensure the long term survival of the building and what it represents.

3. THE SITE





4. CONDITION OF THE CHURCH

- The grade 2 listed building is currently owned by Homes England.
- Work has been done previously to ensure the site is structurally safe and is weather tight.
- Internally, it has been largely gutted.
- It is assumed but to be confirmed that the work to address dry rot previously existing was successful.
- A full survey will be needed once a direction concept has been agreed to inform future requirements.

5 KEY REQUIREMENTS

- We would like the building generally to feel light and airy during the day and warm and cozy after dark.
- It should be warm and welcoming for all generations, with areas of enjoyable bustle and buzz and quieter areas as appropriate.
- It is a key requirement that noise levels should be effectively managed to create a quiet oasis.
- It should be possible to divide the building into different zones for different purposes including meetings and events, quiet conversations, and exercise / activity..
- The main areas should encourage people of all ages to come together but should also include provision for people who would prefer to stay in smaller groups.
- Overall, the regeneration should result in a place of beauty and wow that people want to come back to time and again.

6. STRUCTURAL REQUIREMENTS

- We have yet to form a vision of what Concept 1 is likely to look like physically and will need professional assistance with this but it is probable that it will include:
 - The addition of at least one mezzanine floor to make best of the space.
 - Possibly a glass roof to maximise the light coming into the building.
 - Core areas for key functions with flexible, dividable space for other uses.
 - Environmentally friendly elements for heating, lighting, and water at cost effective rates.
 - Full consideration for disabled access, health and safety, and the particular requirements and needs of different user groups.
 - Effective use of IT and other technology to maximise functionality, connection and control.

Example only (not St John's)



Example of possible outdoor area (not St John's)



6. CONTEXTUAL REQUIREMENTS

- The parish has a number of facilities in the area. In particular these include:
 - The Village Hall – which offers a range of facilities and group activities.
 - Whittingham Sports and Social Club – a private club which is currently being redeveloped.
- St John's will need to find a niche that complements these for the overall good of the area.

7. FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

7.1 Internal

- The essence of this Concept 1 is to reflect the history of the Whittingham hospital site and redevelop the church as a community hub which enhances the health and well-being of visitors in its broadest sense.
- Taken together with the need to be financially self-sustaining, we anticipate the key functional requirements of the regenerated site to include:
 - A vibrant, easily accessible café with bar that people want to return to time and time again.
 - Social and business meeting areas that can be used for:
 - Quiet conversations, board gaming, knitting groups, toddler groups, health consultations and other public outreach services, men's sheds, meeting hire, community IT support etc.
 - During evening use, it is anticipated that these areas could be used for amateur dramatic groups, music groups and similar with a view to putting on shows at the village hall.
 - It would also be a good way of pulling the community together if the regenerated facilities could be used for comedy clubs and other shows and events.
 - Potentially, a wedding area that respects and takes advantage of the beauty of the church as a way of generating income if this can be achieved without dominating the other functions.
 - An event area appropriately linked to the café that could be used independently or supported by the facilities of the café for meetings, parties, wedding breakfasts etc.
 - Possibly health facilities not available elsewhere in the village but relevant to the population (such as one or two resistance swimming pools).
 - An area for quiet reflection such as a library.
 - Areas in the library or around the building:
 - reflecting the unique history of the Whittingham hospital site,
 - providing information about the beauty of the local area and what activities are available elsewhere.
 - serving as a hub for connecting people who need services and things with those who can provide them.
 - If possible, an evening facility for younger people that helps develop social responsibility, gives them something to do and helps engage them in valuing and building the sense of community in the area.

- If space permits, we would like to include a number of small artisan workshops that can be let or hired to local people, both to give them somewhere to work but also to showcase and sell their products as a way of attracting people back to the site on a regular basis. This might include jewellery and other craft workshops but potentially also a gin still, microbrewery or similar.
- If space permits, we would like to consider the possibility of a small artisan bakery, both to supply the café and the local community but also to create a welcoming smell of comfort as people come into the building.
- An IT area with a small number of computers, printers etc.

7.1 External

- An external area which can be used by café users and other visitors to the centre in most weathers.

8. SUPPORTING FUNCTIONALITY

- The site should include high quality supporting functionality appropriate to the overall concept. These will include:
 - Adequate and accessible parking,
 - Toilet facilities including a Changing Places toilet for people with limited mobility.
 - Baby changing facilities.
 - Administrative and management space
 - Kitchen and service area.
 - Storage space to support the eventual functionality.
 - Easy access for delivery vehicles (and potentially temporary refrigeration and similar for weddings and other events).
 - Noise cancelling / dampening solutions to maintain the overall sense of a place which enhances mental health and well-being.

9. IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT

- Whittingham Parish is taking the initial lead on coming up with a direction for the regeneration of St John's church to create a sense of purpose and direction.
- In due course, the council will facilitate the establishment of a limited company in the form of a Community Land Trust or similar appropriate format which will take control of the project and the subsequent running of the site and facilities.
- The Trust will be secular and the aim will be as far as possible to ensure that the Trust reflects the population of the area.
- The council will try as far as possible to ensure the Trust includes an appropriate range of skills including management, legal, financial, community engagement, PR and similar. Most importantly however, it will do its best to ensure that the Trust is made up of people with a passion for what the council is trying to achieve with the site.
- It is anticipated that following regeneration, the new facilities will require full time management with supporting staff as necessary.
- It is anticipated that the site will be open both during the day and into the evening to enable it to fulfil its role of a community hub for everyone who wishes to use it.

10. MEASURES OF SUCCESS

We will know we have succeeded in achieving the aims of this concept if:

- We have implemented a solution that preserves the building for at least the next 100 years.
- We have created a space for the village that is well used, well loved, and valued by the community.
- People feel the place is somewhere they can come to recharge their batteries and connect with others.
- People feel the place is somewhere they feel known, welcomed and 'at home'.
- The facilities contribute to the health and well-being of those who use them and to the good of the broader community.
- The building and the facilities are financially self-sustaining in the short, medium and longer term.

Cllr Dave Price
07 October 2023