

Whittingham Parish Council – 13th June 2024

Proposals Regarding the Regeneration of St John's Church, Whittingham

1. INTRODUCTION

Whittingham Parish Council formally adopted a Parish Plan for the area on 08 June 2023 following a public consultation process. (*Minute 23/24.37*)

As part of Theme 3 – Culture, Community and Services, it was agreed that the council would:

Objective	Action
Look at opportunities to restore and re-purpose St John's Church on the hospital site for community use	• Carry out informal explorations • Establish sub-group with interested residents to actively explore options and sources of funding. • Aim to produce resourced development proposal by June 2024

A range of work has been carried out since then including:

- the development of a concept document and outline roadmap for the church, subsequently adopted by Council on 12 October 2023 (*Minute 223/24.102*).
- meetings and site visits with:
 - Emmanuel Church, Plungington, who are undertaking a similar regeneration,
 - regeneration specialists, Safe Regeneration,
 - local architects, NWDC,
 - Homes England who own the site
- an inspection report from NWDC on the current state of the building as at April 2024.
- bid submissions for the development of further community engagement work and feasibility studies from Safe Regeneration and NWDC in May 2024.

It is now clear that the regeneration of the church will be a major undertaking with capital costs in the order of £3m plus substantial, but currently unknown, ongoing revenue funding required to ensure the future sustainability of the church.

Members met informally on 23 May 2024 to discuss possible next steps. The purpose of this document is to report back formally to Council, set out the currently identified options and to seek a decision from Councillors on the preferred way forward.

2. CURRENTLY IDENTIFIED OPTIONS

The following options have been identified to date:

	OPTION	DESCRIPTION	COMMENT
1	Leave to Homes England	The grade 2 listed building is the responsibility of Homes England who have a legal responsibility to prevent the building from deteriorating any further and to determine its long term future. The recent inspection report produced for the council indicates that the building is in a very poor condition. Although it is largely watertight following previous remedial work by Homes England, there is evidence of: • incorrect materials being used for repointing at some stage which may cause further cracking, • bird and bat roosting which may have compromised the tower floors, • suspected ongoing dry rot in a number of significant roof areas • suspected ongoing dry rot in other areas • suspected penetrating water in the north valley gutter. There are also significant concerns about the effects of water run-off from the recent adjacent housing estate which is not being properly drained and will undermine the church foundations if not addressed.	The council could limit its involvement in the church to engaging further with Homes England and holding them to account to undertake further remedial work to address the problems identified in the recent inspection report. This would prevent further deterioration but would not lead to the long term redevelopment of the site. The council could address the long term redevelopment by actively encouraging and supporting Homes England to progress an initiative of some sort at the site. This is likely to be residential redevelopment although Homes England have advised there is little commercial appetite for this at the moment. On the down side, redevelopment would be out of the control and influence of the council. Whilst potentially saving the church, this approach would probably not enable the council to re-purpose the building for community use.

2	Hermitage Building	Whilst undertaking initial thinking to date, the Hermitage building near St John's Church has been vacated and may well become available on the open market. The council could look at alternative opportunities to provide a building for community use by procuring and re-purposing the Hermitage Building.	St John's is in a very poor condition and will take a lot of money to redevelop and ensure its long term sustainability. If the council wishes to provide additional facilities for community use, it could look at the Hermitage Building or elsewhere as an option. On the plus side, this could enable the council to provide additional facilities at a lower cost (although the fit between the Village Hall and the Sports and Social Club will also need to be taken in to account). On the down side, this would do nothing to ensure the long term safety or regeneration of the historically important church itself.
3	Church + Hermitage Building	A more creative solution might be to look at undertaking a combination of developments across the Hermitage and St John's sites.	This would have the advantage of trying to secure the long term future of the church + a flexible community facility. This could also help address access and parking issues for the church but would of course be a substantially more significant project and may be beyond the scope of the Council to carry out.
4	The Grapes or other premises	The Grapes pub at the heart of the village is currently closed and it may be possible to acquire the building (or other premises) for community use.	This option is potentially appealing if the council wishes to provide additional facilities for community use and is willing to leave the redevelopment of the church to Homes England. As with the Hermitage, it would do nothing by itself to secure the future of the historically important church building

5	Progress St John's redevelopment to feasibility stage	The council has received initial proposals from Safe Regeneration and NWDC to help develop a feasibility analysis on regenerating the site. These require further development and the council would also need to go to a broader tender before accepting a proposal.	The total cost of the proposals to date is £30,000 but it is currently unclear whether the output of that would meet the council's needs at this stage. It would therefore be preferable to issue an 'Invitation to Tender' along the lines of the recently drafted document.
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3. EVALUATION

The strategic objective in the Development Plan of looking at opportunities to restore and re-purpose St John's Church on the hospital site for community use was driven primarily by a wish to save an historically important building in the village.

It was always clear that this would be an expensive, and potentially unaffordable undertaking but the hope was, and remains, that the council will be able to find external grant and other funding to make the capital costs of the project viable if an appropriate way forward can be found to ensure the long term sustainability of the building.

Access and parking to the building remain a challenge and if the aim was simply to provide a building for community use, we would not be looking at the redevelopment of the church site.

Option 1 – Leaves to Homes England

As Homes England has the statutory responsibility for the building, the Council needs to be pro-active and vocal in ensuring that the organisation maintains the structure of the building and addresses the currently identified problems of water ingress, dry rot, bat and bird infestation and the ground water run-off from the redevelopment. This is the minimum that needs to be done.

In addition, given the limited resources of the council, it is suggested that the council actively supports Homes England in finding a long term solution which will ensure the survival and regeneration of the building.

Option 2 – Hermitage Building

Trying to progress a redevelopment of the Hermitage Building on its own would do nothing to help save St John's Church but it may enable the development of an alternative form of community resource.

This would be a very different type of project and unless the Council determines that the building is of significant interest in its own right, it should perhaps only consider the Hermitage building as part of a solution that includes the church at this stage.

Option 3 – Hermitage Building + St John's Church

Practicalities and cost aside, the best of all worlds might be to try and develop a project that combines the redevelopment of St John's and the Hermitage in some way. The magnitude of the work involved would be significant but it may be easier to generate an ongoing revenue stream to ensure the ongoing future of the church in this way.

Option 4 – The Grapes or Other Building

Whilst progressing the redevelopment of another building for community use might be interesting, this option would do nothing to enable the survival of St John's Church. The option is therefore not relevant to the council's aims at this stage and should be ignored.

Option 5 – Progress to Formal Feasibility Study

This is the only option which would enable the council to continue to progress the feasibility of the regeneration of St John's Church.

A part of this it would make sense to consider the merits of i) a stand-alone approach, and ii) an approach involving The Hermitage. This is because the only way to save the fabric of the Church may be to secure the building as is and without re-development and provide a community facility using the Hermitage.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended:

1. That the Council immediately, actively and persistently engages with Homes England to get them to carry out remedial work as identified in the recent report to prevent further deterioration.
2. That the Council engages with Homes England to get them to progress a redevelopment initiative of their own to secure the long term future of the church.
3. That the Council issues an 'Invitation to Tender' to potential suppliers for the preparation of a properly costed and detailed feasibility for redeveloping the Church (see attached).

This should take into account as a starting point:

- a. The Concept Paper agreed by Council on 12 October 2023,
- b. Possibilities offered by including the Hermitage building,
- c. The overall aspirations of the Council to ensure a viable building for community use.
- d. Other ideas not currently identified that might arise in the process.

Funding for developing a feasibility report would need to come from CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funding,

Councillors do not need to make a financial commitment until tender responses have been received and evaluated but it should be recognised that once a tender proposal has been accepted, the investment in a feasibility study could prove to have been unnecessary if Homes England are able to progress a successful initiative of their own.

Cllr David Price
24 May 2024