



Annex G

The Right Reverend the Bishop of Oxford
Church House Oxford
Langford Locks
Kidlington
OXFORD
OX5 1GF

Harvey Howlett
Casework Support Manager
Pastoral and Closed Churches

Your ref:
Our ref: RC27/28
16 January 2018

Dear Bishop

**Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011
Closed Church Building of Astwood St Peter
Proposed Pastoral (Church Buildings Disposal) Scheme**

Following the publication of the draft scheme providing for the sale of this closed church and annexed land to be sold for use as a single residential dwelling and ancillary purposes, we received three representations: one against and two commenting on the scheme. The representation against came from Mr James Drever and the comments came from Mr Richard Peats on behalf of Historic England and from Mr Luke Gledhill on behalf of Milton Keynes Council. I enclose copies of the representations.

Mr James Drever

Mr Drever has submitted a lengthy and detailed representation setting out the history and importance of the church building. Mr Drever expresses his in principal opposition to the privatisation of public spaces, arguing against the conversion and sale of Astwood church on the basis that it will cease to have the possibility of public access or to be used for worship.

He notes that the Diocese has gone to significant trouble to find an alternative use but argues that it would perhaps have been a better use to swap Astwood church for that of Broughton St Lawrence, now in the CCT, and secure its future by preserving it for the nation whilst perhaps bringing Broughton back into use in the expanded residential community which had grown around it.

Mr Drever questions whether the pastoral grounds for closure are, in reality, financial. He suggests that the Diocese may be in need of the financial return achieved by a residential sale and argues that the approach to marketing the building and finding a purchaser prior to determining whether the use is suitable renders the consultation process a *fait accompli*.

He concludes that he believes that it is right to challenge the presumption that disposal for residential use is the correct way to proceed when there might be other options available and he considers that, however excellent and sympathetic the plans of the purchaser, conversion to residential use would be deplorable.

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Historic England

Mr Peats, for Historic England, has written in detail to explain why they do not oppose the conversion to residential use. He notes that residential residential conversion is bound to have a major impact on the significance as a historic building. Whilst noting that, thanks to a bomb hitting the nave in 1940, the interior has few furnishings of interest, he expresses the view that the open nature of the interior is a vital element of the church's architectural and historic interest.

He explains that, given the importance of its openness, dividing up the interior, which would be necessary to convert it into a dwelling, would inevitably entail what we would consider to be substantial harm to the its significance. He explains that any planning and listed building consent application for conversion would have to meet the criteria set out in the National Planning Policy Framework if it is to win approval and sets out the relevant criteria.

In the light of this he explains that the key questions is whether a viable use which would not involve subdividing the building, such as community use, has been seriously sought and not materialised. He writes that having seen the marketing information supplied he is satisfied that reasonable steps have been made to find an alternative use that would avoid subdivision of the interior. In such a small village, which already has a village hall, community uses are likely to be very limited, so the lack of interest in non-residential uses is not surprising. He concludes therefore, with great regret, the Historic England accept that residential conversion, and the substantial harm that this would inevitably entail, is the only practical way of preserving the building.

He goes on to note some specific recommendations about the preservation of the contents and in particular the bells and bell frame, and the font.

Milton Keynes Council

Mr Gledhill on behalf of Milton Keynes Council, confirms that they have no objections to the pastoral scheme for single residential use subject to obtaining planning permission and listed building consent.

It will be necessary for the Commissioners' Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee to consider this matter and I should be grateful for your comments on the representations in general and on the following, more specific, points:

1. What were the considerations which led to the recommendation of a residential use of this Grade II* listed church building?
2. What attempts were made to secure an alternative community or church use for the building before considering a residential use?
3. Could the Diocese comment on the suggestion from Mr Drever concerning Broughton St Lawrence?
4. To what extent has the Diocesan deliberations in this case been driven by factors of finance?
5. Are there any other factors which the Commissioners should be aware of in their consideration of these representations?

The next two meetings of the Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee at which this case could be considered are due to be held on 14th February and 15th March respectively. If the matter is to be considered at the meeting in February we will need to receive your response by Thursday 25th January, at the latest. This is to allow time for this letter and your reply to be sent to the representors, for them to make any further comments and, if necessary, for you to respond.

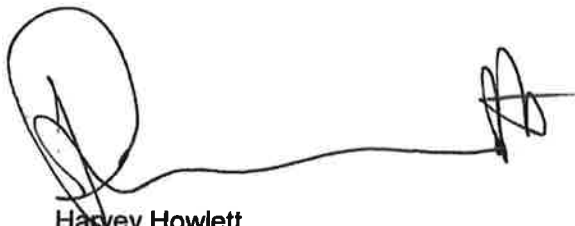
The Commissioners are now required to consider the representations under the quasi-judicial process laid down by the Measure. A legal challenge may arise from the Commissioners' decision if, among other things, it is based materially on incorrect information. Of necessity the Commissioners rely on others to provide information to assist their deliberations, and to this end I should be grateful for your help.

Once we have received your comments the Commissioners will decide, on the basis of the written representations, whether oral representations will be heard or the case considered on the papers alone. The decision on whether to hold a hearing is one which will be taken by the Commissioners in the light of the particular circumstances of the case. We will confirm that decision in due course.

We would normally expect representations to be considered at the earliest opportunity but please let me know if you are unable to meet the timetable for the 14th February meeting.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Petronella Spivey at the Diocesan Office and to the Commissioners' Case Officer, Anne Griffiths, for information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'H' followed by a long horizontal line that ends in a smaller, more complex flourish.

Harvey Howlett
Encs

29th January 2018

Mr H Howlett
Closed Churches Division
Church Commissioners
Church House
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3AZ

Dear Mr Howlett

Representation against draft Scheme for Astwood St Peter

Regarding Mr Drever's representation, I make the following comments on the five specific points in your letter which I have re-arranged to reflect better the order of decision making.

1. Attempts made to secure an alternative community or church use

Before its closure for regular public worship, the PCC held consultations in Astwood to discuss the use of St Peter's for community purposes and there was no interest locally in this proposal. The existing village hall in Astwood was said to be underused. Other Christian bodies were also contacted who declined the offer as the building was too remote for their purposes.

Formal marketing resulted in no offers from any national or private trusts or other Christian bodies. An expression of interest was received for the use of the building as a Christian retreat (with a small private flat) which was provisionally accepted by the diocese pending their receipt of a business plan from the prospective purchaser. Unfortunately, this offer was later withdrawn.

2. Considerations which led to a recommendation of residential use

The diocese had regard to the advice of the Church Buildings Council which advised that a suitable alternative use be found for St Peter's.

Marketing by agents resulted in two firm offers for use as a single residential dwelling and the above-mentioned offer for use as a Christian retreat, later withdrawn.

The diocese eventually accepted one of the two offers as the prospective buyers (a couple) demonstrated during an interview a good understanding of building conservation principles, planning requirements and had sufficient means for not only the purchase, but also the considerable cost of repairing the building (which has a number of defects including structural problems, identified in a recent report by Andrew Dust, Structural Engineers) and its conversion.

Representatives of the Commissioners, the diocese, and the prospective purchasers and their architect met also with representatives of Milton Keynes Council and Historic England on site who indicated that they were not opposed in principle to residential use provided that its impact on the historic fabric and the setting of the building was within acceptable limits. The Council also provided similar written pre-planning advice.

The diocese therefore felt that it could proceed to recommend to the Commissioners its sale for residential use based on the advice of the CBC, MKC and HE, and because no use for community purposes or for Christian worship had been received despite the efforts of the PCC and the diocese.

3. Mr Drever's suggestion regarding Broughton St Lawrence being returned to use as a church and Astwood St Peter being vested in the Churches Conservation Trust

The diocese did not consider the vesting of St Peter's in the Churches Conservation Trust as the advice of the Church Buildings Council's statutory advisory committee, was that, if an alternative use could not be found for St Peter's, it was not convinced that a recommendation for vesting in the Churches Conservation Trust would be forthcoming.

I note also that Broughton is the more significant church as evidenced by its Grade I listing, and its rare medieval wall paintings, and therefore more suitable for vesting, whereas Astwood is Grade II* listed, its lesser significance a result of damage to its interior by bomb damage in WWII. No figures are available on what would be the cost of vesting Astwood in the CCT were it to be recommended, but this is likely to be a high figure as indicated in a recent report on the building's structural problems, referred to above.

4. Extent to which the decision has been driven by financial considerations

The diocese was not motivated by financial considerations as considerable efforts were made to find a use for community purposes or as a place of Christian worship or retreat, for which there is no requirement to achieve best value. The above-mentioned offer for use as a Christian retreat, later withdrawn, was the lowest offer, which the diocese would have accepted had it not been withdrawn which was for personal not financial reasons.

5. Other factors

Regarding provision for Anglican worship in Astwood, one annual service is held in the Old Swan Inn in Astwood, as Mr Drever has reported, and Hardmead church, just over a mile from Astwood, is available for occasional Christian worship as are the other nearby benefice churches at Chicheley, Sherington and North Crawley.

Other comments

Regarding Mr Drever's point about buyers profiting from the on-sale of closed churches, the diocese makes its decisions based on valuations received from its marketing agents. Although it may appear that buyers have profited from their purchase of Anglican churches, the on-sale price reflects the first buyer's purchase, expenditure on repair and conversion and thereafter the increase in property values since the date of the first disposal which have been steep in recent decades.

It is my understanding that the transfer of churches to the Secretary of State for preservation under s.79 of the Measure, referred to by Mr Drever, is in practice no longer an option.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Mr Drever for putting in writing his carefully considered comments and suggestions to the challenges that the Church of England faces, and for sharing his extensive knowledge of historic churches and past disposals of Anglican churches.

Yours sincerely





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Annex H

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St Lawrence's Church, Broughton, Buckinghamshire

Address: **Broughton Village, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK10 9AA**
[How to find us](#) | [Access information](#)

Opening times: **Keyholder nearby, details on the notice at the church or please call 01223 324442 to arrange access**



1/7

Stunningly detailed medieval wallpaintings

69

Within a stone's throw of the new builds on the outskirts of Milton Keynes, the rich Victorian stained glass of St Lawrence sheds light on one of the greatest medieval treasures in the area - a series of stunning medieval wallpaintings. These exquisitely detailed pictures remained hidden behind plaster for 300 years before being rediscovered during a restoration in 1849.

The paintings include the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Christ (a Pieta) and St George killing the dragon, despite having lost his head when the ceiling was restored in the fifteenth century as well as a Doom, St Helena and St Eligius and one of only two surviving Warning to Swearers in the country. There are also some interesting memorials.

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This free of charge short guide contains details of all the churches we care for in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire. Printed copies of the county guide are also available at the church.

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20