

Church Commissioners

Mission, Pastoral and Church Property Committee

Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011

The benefice of Upper Weardale (Diocese of Durham)

Note by James Davidson-Brett

Summary

- (i) The draft Pastoral Scheme providing for the union of the parish of Saint John-in-Weardale and the parish of Westgate, being two of the parishes within the area of the benefice of Upper Weardale, for the church of Saint John-in-Weardale to be the parish church of the new parish and for the parish church of Saint Andrew, Westgate to be declared closed for regular public worship, attracted **two representations against**.
- (ii) The representors variously say that the benefice has been suffering from a period of difficulty, is weary and has become inward looking; that there have been significant changes since the draft proposals were initially envisaged which have changed the facts of the diocesan rationale and offer the potential for an alternative solution; that it is possible to form a PCC immediately and there are retired clergy with PTO in the benefice keen to develop the life of the church. There has been no opportunity for the election of a PCC as there has been no Annual Meeting of Parishioners and none planned for 2023. They say that accessibility of the church building is no more difficult than others. The attitude of the priest-in-charge (who has now resigned her post) has been that a decision has been taken and therefore no discussion will be had about alternative futures. As an alternative to closure a number of possible solutions are suggested. A “stay of execution” is sought whilst, within a new Deanery plan, the potential for an invigorated church community is explored. It is said that most of the benefice’s residents are not aware that the church’s potential closure and the validity of the statutory Notice is questioned. It is believed that the reorganisation of the parish is unlikely to work as parishioners are unlikely to travel to the proposed united parish’s other church.
- (iii) The Bishop of Durham says that the congregation at St Andrew’s from within the parish had dropped to two people and despite a well-attended public meeting to discuss the future of the building and the need for people to step forward to form a PCC, none were forthcoming. He says that incumbents alone do not revitalise churches and it is vital that there are lay people who want to work with the incumbent to achieve this revitalisation – there are none stepping forward at Westgate. For a new worshipping church body to begin to use this building and maintain it, there would have to be a new church plant and he sees no capacity, energy, or leaders currently for such a plant. If there were, he thinks it more likely that it would be used to bring revitalisation to one of the other four churches in the benefice, all of which are struggling. Even if a situation arises in which a church plant was ventured in Westgate, this building would not be a sensible choice for its location.

ANNEX A

SUMMARY OF MAIN PROVISIONS OF DRAFT SCHEME (NOT PART OF THE DRAFT SCHEME)

This draft Scheme provides for the union of the parish of Saint John-in-Weardale and the parish of Westgate, being two of the parishes within the area of the benefice of Upper Weardale in the diocese of Durham, for the parish church of the parish of Saint John-in-Weardale to be the parish church of the new parish and for the parish church of the parish of Westgate to be declared closed for regular public worship.

DRAFT

PASTORAL CHURCH BUILDINGS SCHEME

This Scheme is made by the Church Commissioners ("the Commissioners") this day of 202 in pursuance of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011, the Right Reverend Paul, Bishop of Durham, having consented thereto.

Part I

Union of parishes

1. The parish of Saint John-in-Weardale and the parish of Westgate, being two of the parishes within the area of the benefice of Upper Weardale in the diocese of Durham, shall be united to create a new parish which shall be named "The Parish of Saint John's Chapel and Westgate".

Parish church

2. The church of Saint John, being the parish church of the parish of Saint John-in-Weardale, shall be the parish church of the new parish.

Archdeaconry and deanery

3. The new parish shall belong to the archdeaconry of Auckland and the deanery of Stanhope.

Declaration of closure for regular public worship

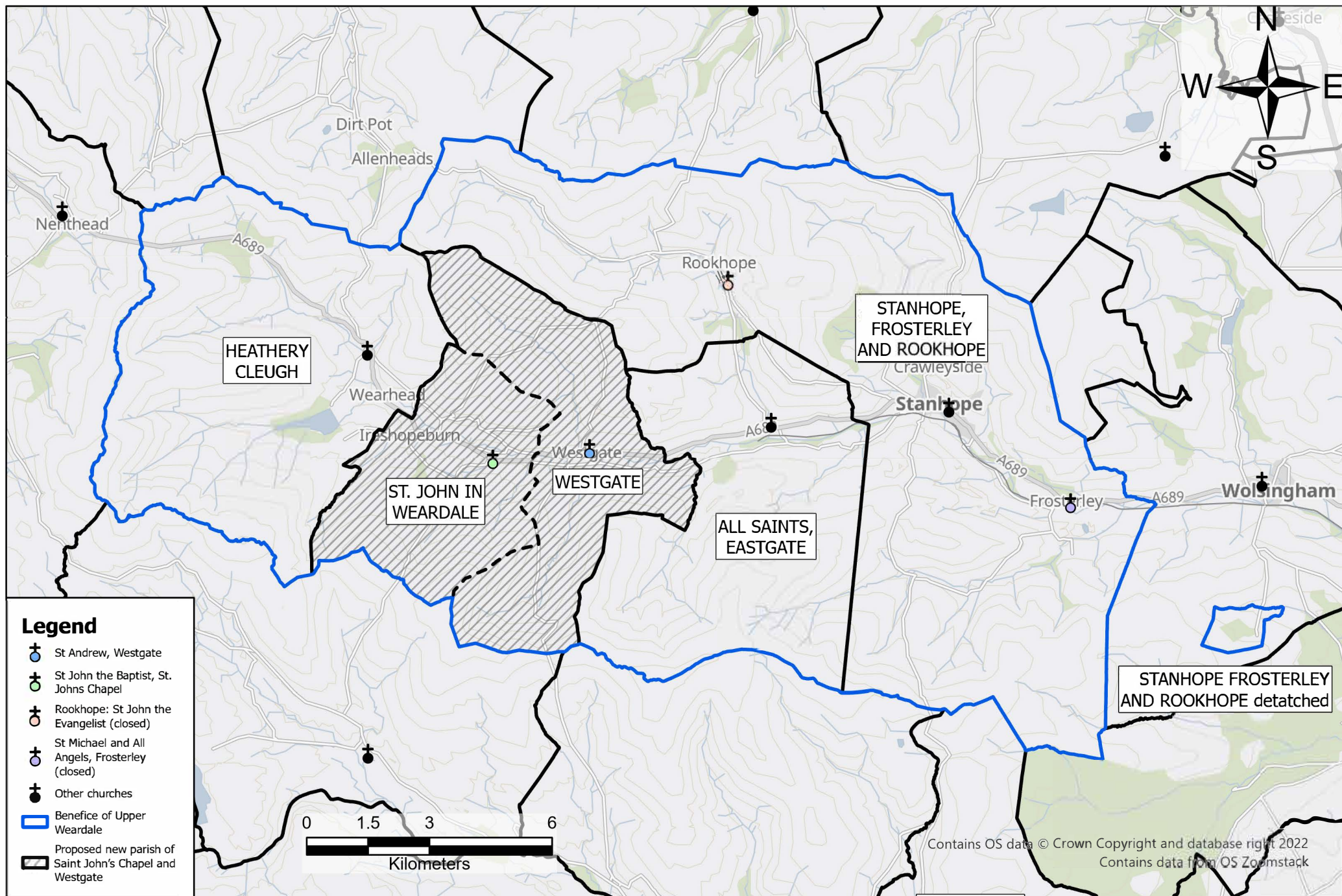
4. (1) The church of Saint Andrew, being the parish church of the parish of Westgate, shall be declared closed for regular public worship by this Scheme.

(2) Subject to any provisions of the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978 which apply thereto and any directions thereunder, any register books and records of that church which remain in parochial custody shall be transferred to the Durham County and Diocesan Record Office.

Assistant curates: consequential provision

5. If immediately before this Scheme comes into operation any person holds an

Proposed new parish of Saint John's Chapel and Westgate ANNEX B



It is important that the information provided on this form is accurate as the Church Commissioners may rely on such information in their consideration of representations and their decision could be open to legal challenge if any facts upon which they have relied are found to be incorrect.

Please email the completed form(s) to: pastoral@churchofengland.org

BENEFACTICE	Upper Weardale		
Incumbent/Priest-in-Charge (Date of institution/licensing)	Interregnum since April 2023 (Area Dean Rev'd Dr Alastair Prince)		
Patron(s)	Bp of Durham(5)/ Duchy of Lancaster(1)/Lord Chancellor (1) (Crockfords)		
Parsonage house (address)	14 Burnfoot, St. John's Chapel DL13 1QH		
PARISH	St John's Chapel with Westgate		
Population of parish (adults & children) (Please state how computed)	St John's Chapel and Ireshopeburn 600 Stanhope Parish Council + Westgate 300 http://www.discoverweardale.com/explore-weardale/our-villages/westgate		
Churches and sittings (See Note 1 overleaf) Date built (approx.)	1752 (St. John the Baptist Church) Parish Church		
Church services and numbers attending (See Note 2 overleaf) Example: <u>1st Sunday</u> <u>10.00am</u> <u>Holy Communion</u> <u>Common Worship A</u> <u>(30)</u>	<div> Sundays <u>Time 10am</u> <u>Service Eucharist Common</u> <u>Worship</u> <u>Numbers 20</u> <u>Fortnightly alternating</u> <u>Weekdays none</u> <u>Time</u> <u>Service</u> <u>Numbers</u> </div> <div> Sundays At Nearby Heatherycleugh <u>Time 10am</u> <u>Service Eucharist Common</u> <u>Worship</u> <u>Numbers 20</u> <u>Fortnightly alternating</u> <u>Weekdays Alternate Mondays</u> <u>Time 1.15pm</u> <u>Service Praise and Worship</u> <u>Numbers 8-10</u> </div>		
Electoral roll (for the last five years – the most recent first)	20		
Staff/lay assistance (e.g. curates, lay readers, NSMs etc.)	Rev'd Heather Ross Rev'd Michael Baldwin		
Churchmanship and characteristics of that churchmanship	Broad Church		If there is more than one church in the parish please indicate any difference in the churchmanship in the individual churches
Please indicate the whether there is a PCC Resolution under Paragraph 20 of the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests (if so, please explain the exact nature of the alternative arrangements made, and the reasons for requesting the same).	<div> <div align="right"> YES NOT VOTED (</div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> </div> </div> <div> Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests </div>		
Parochial church organisations and number of regular attenders	St. John's Chapel and Heatherycleugh PCC Upper Weardale JPCC		
Other parochial and/or community buildings	Community Buildings: St. John's Chapel Town Hall https://weardale.uk/st-johns-chapel-town-hall/ St. John's Chapel Barrington Hall https://weardale.uk/barrington-hall-st-johns-chapel-2/ Westgate Villlage Hall https://www.westgate-village-hall.co.uk/ Ireshopeburn Village Hall https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100078459442433		Please indicate if any building is not primarily for church use None
Other denominations	Methodists / Vineyard Church		

PLEASE: (i) INDICATE THE LEVEL OF SUPPORT, OR OTHERWISE, OF THE PCC FOR THE PROPOSALS/DRAFT SCHEME (OR ORDER); AND/OR (ii) PLEASE SHOW THE VOTING FIGURES (IF A VOTE WAS TAKEN)			
	<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Abstentions</i>
<i>On the diocesan proposals:</i>			
<i>St John's Chapel PCC</i>	3	0	0

Completed by ...Rev'd Dr Alastair Prince.....(Interim Area Dean.) Date18.07.23.....

Note 1:	Please describe by dedication etc. and state whether the building is a parish church, chapel of ease or other place of worship (eg mission hall etc.)
Note 2:	Please state (1) the frequency of church services, (2) the time, (3) the type and/or name of the service (e.g. Holy Communion, Sung Eucharist, Morning Prayer etc.), (4) the service book used and (5) the average congregation for each service.

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21 June 2023

Dear James,

Further to your letter dated 26 May 2023 addressed to the Bishop of Durham in connection with the proposed closure for regular public worship of the church of St Andrew, Westgate, please see below the diocesan response.

The diocesan comments are shown in annotations to your letter in green italics.

Yours sincerely,

The Rt Revd Paul Butler
Bishop of Durham

Dear Bishop

Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011
The benefice of Upper Weardale
Proposed Pastoral Scheme

Following the publication of a draft Pastoral Church Buildings Scheme providing for the union of the parish of Saint John-in-Weardale and the parish of Westgate, being two of the parishes within the area of the benefice of Upper Weardale, for the church of Saint John-in-Weardale to be the parish church of the new parish and for the parish church of Saint Andrew, Westgate to be declared closed for regular public worship, we have received two representations (from Mr A E Peart and Mrs Helen Buchanan) against the proposal, copies of which I attach.

The following rationale accompanied the draft Scheme:

Closure is proposed because, sadly, there is no longer any regular Sunday congregation at St Andrew's church, Westgate, and it has proved impossible for the parish to find Church Officers and PCC members, so the governance of the church cannot be maintained. The possibility of creating a Festival Church has been explored, but the church has poor accessibility and there was very little local interest in this option. Closure therefore seems the only sensible proposal.



Mrs Buchanan begins by outlining her extensive service to the Church. She believes the current proposals are not in tune with the current Diocesan Strategy and that the benefice has been suffering from a period of difficulty, is weary and has become inward looking.

She says that there have been significant changes since the draft proposals were initially envisaged which have changed the facts of the rationale and offer the potential for an alternative solution.

Both Mr Peart, who is the Treasurer/organist and carries out other duties, and Mrs Buchanan say that it has not been possible to determine whether any congregation is available as there have been no services offered at St Andrew's since 2019. The two special services for late Queen's Jubilee and subsequent celebration of her life did garner congregations, as have more recent pastoral services including a funeral with over 100 congregants.

Mrs Buchanan says that it is possible to form a PCC immediately, there is a Treasurer (*Mr Peart*) in place, at least one other willing to stand as Secretary and there are new residents who have indicated their interest in supporting the church. There has been no opportunity for a PCC to be elected as there has been no Annual Meeting of Parishioners and none is planned for 2023, the reason given is that "it has been decided that Westgate is closing".

She says there are a number of recently retired clergy with PTO who live in the benefice and are keen to offer their skills and talents in developing the life of the church, three of whom have significant experience of working in rural multi-parish benefices and have much to offer.

Both say that accessibility of the church building is no more difficult than others within the benefice and Mrs Buchanan says that there is considerable interest in exploring alternative options to secure its future. However, the attitude of the Priest-in-Charge (who has now resigned her post) has been that a decision has been taken and therefore no discussion will be had about alternative futures.

Mrs Buchanan says that the Deanery Plan which envisaged the closure of St Andrew's was approved prior to the appointment of the Priest-in-Charge who decided not to accept the Plan. Instead, a different Plan was proposed and subsequently rejected by every benefice in the Deanery. Between her appointment and resignation, the Priest-in-Charge had two lengthy periods of sick leave, has had to contend with the challenges of the Covid pandemic and the resultant engagement with the church leader in this benefice has necessarily been very low and this has also had a very detrimental effect on the wider community's engagement with the church.

The benefice and the deanery are now actively engaging with the new Deanery Plan which also proposes the union of Heatherscleugh and Saint John-in-Weardale (with St Andrew's) as a single parish with two places of worship, with the assumption that the draft Scheme will be implemented.

She says the proposed closure of St Andrew's therefore has a significantly different context than when first proposed. The broader proposal is to create a challenging single parish with a large, rural population with many tiny, remote settlements and no public transport on a Sunday.

There was a well-attended Public Meeting to discuss the closure of St Andrew's. However, many local people have a great faith but do not wish to be "in the pews" as part of a perceived "club" which is dominated by a few long serving and very hard-working individuals. Nevertheless, they do support the special services when they are offered, which they have not been consistently in the past few years. However, Mr Peart noted that after the Meeting, when asked, there were no volunteers willing to be on the PCC.

As an alternative to closure, between them she and Mr Peart suggests a number of possible solutions including: use as a new "mission community" focussing on music for which the church has a strong history; youth and the concept of pilgrimage; community support activities; a centre for ecumenical work; and using the building for community activities. Mrs Buchanan asks for a "stay of execution" where they explore, within a new Deanery plan, the potential for an invigorated church community.

Mr Peart believes that the financial status of the diocese may have an influence on the policy of church closure. He says that most of the benefice's residents are not aware that the church is a candidate for closure and that the Notice inside the church did not fulfil its function as the church is locked and invalidates the closure procedure.

He believes that the reorganisation of the parish by uniting it with St John's is unlikely to work as the people of Westgate will not travel to Saint John's and will thus have no church. The Vineyard Church did operate successfully in Westgate and therefore one would assume the parish church should also be viable.

If you wish the Scheme to proceed as drafted notwithstanding the representation against it, it will be necessary for our Mission, Pastoral and Church Property Committee to consider the matter. In that case, I should be grateful for your comments on the representations in general and on the following points: -

1. Please set out the circumstances leading to the proposal to close this church. Was the proposal brought forward as part of a deanery plan?

During the interregnum from January 2017 until March 2020 initially weekly services were held in six churches in the benefice of Upper Weardale with a combined service in one church rotated around the benefice on the last Sunday of each month.

After the closure of Frosterley church in mid-2019 the above service pattern continued but it became apparent that there was no congregation in Westgate church, just the organist and the celebrant. A decision was, therefore, made to alternate services at St John's Chapel and Westgate with the congregation of St John's Chapel travelling to Westgate with the hope of keeping it alive and open for Westgate residents to attend. However, as the weeks passed, and with the winter months finding Westgate church cold, damp and difficult to access, the St John's Chapel congregation questioned the logic of going there when no one from Westgate ever came. At that point the St John's Chapel congregation did stop alternating, but even then there were occasional services and Westgate was still included in the joint service rota.

In summary, following the closure of St Michael and All Angels' church, Frosterley and indeed the church in Rookhope a few years before, people began to worship in Stanhope or one of the other churches in the benefice without the issues associated with maintaining the extra PCCs and buildings. Although there was sadness, there was a deep pragmatism, which is characteristic of those communities. This is a region that has seen significant population decline over the last

decades, and so the infrastructure in Weardale has changed as a result. The remaining churches are growing with the greater time that can be given to their maintenance and support. Indeed, the last person to be churchwarden (who was a youth worker in Weardale for many years) at Westgate is the person who triggered the formal closure process.

The deanery plan makes no mention of the closure of Westgate church which is principally a matter for the benefice of Upper Weardale. The parish profile by which the current priest-in-charge was appointed referenced the beginning of formal conversations about church closure at Westgate.

2. Please confirm the level of support, or otherwise, for what is being proposed during the local consultation process. Given that we understand there was a well-attended Public Meeting to discuss the proposed closure do local people know about the proposal? Was the notice at St Andrew's church displayed where it was publicly visible? Were announcements made at other churches in the benefice?

The notice was attached to the outer porch so that it could be read by anyone without entering church. The notice on the door could be seen from the road.

The priest-in-charge properly convened a public meeting in Westgate Village Hall. This meeting was advertised by giving notice for several weeks in the parish news sheet, posters put up around the village of Westgate, and on social media. The meeting was well attended with the room full of Westgate residents. Neither Helen Buchanan nor Alec Peart attended the meeting.

The priest-in-charge chaired the public meeting and in doing so explained why closure was being considered ie because no one had been attending church services there and that crucially there was no one currently willing to be on the PCC to look after the church. The priest-in-charge reported that the church could stay open if four or five people were willing to consider forming a PCC and she did so in a positive manner. At the meeting, which was not attended by Mrs Buchanan, the priest-in-charge was open to allow attenders to speak. Many attenders did speak and asked questions, the priest-in-charge also assuring attenders that she was available for them to come to her later should they want to pursue a discussion outside the context of the meeting.

After the public meeting, however, the main concern related to funerals and burials. Once assurance was provided that in the event of the church closing the churchyard would remain open and burials would continue in Westgate, even though the funeral service would happen in St John's Chapel, there was general contentment.

3. Please comment on the different view expressed by the representors regarding the willingness of lay people to fill church offices and the lack of opportunity for them to be elected to the PCC?

As mentioned above, at the well-attended public meeting it was made clear that volunteers to form a PCC would be welcomed. No volunteers were forthcoming.

Mrs Buchanan does not live in the parish and is not on Westgate's Electoral Roll.

The PCC Treasurer is not a communicant member of the Church of England, and is not a resident at Westgate, and does attend other churches in the benefice. Despite ample opportunity for people to offer the priest-in-charge support by way of joining the PCC, no offers have been forthcoming from within the community of Westgate.

4. How much weight to you give to the Priest-in-Charge's ill health as a contributory factor in the proposed closure? Would a new incumbent to the benefice be able to revitalise the church? Please comment on the view that there are a number of recently retired local clergy able to offer their services. Please also comment on the view that the readiness of people to attend services at St Andrew's has not been tested as services have not been provided. Has consideration been given to offering services other than Sunday morning worship?

The decision to move towards closure happened before the last incumbent's period of ill health. Before this, there was a three year interregnum, and a further incumbent who died in post after a period of extended ill health.

In response to the question of whether a new incumbent in the benefice might be able to revitalise the church, the following points must be considered. It is frequently the hope of a parish that this may be the case. However, incumbents alone do not revitalise churches. Where they do sometimes bring some capacity to doing so, other factors are always necessary. Among these, it is vital that there are lay people and lay leaders who want to work with the incumbent to achieve this revitalisation. As explained throughout this response, this is simply not the case in Westgate. Also, for a church building to be relevant to the revitalisation of a church community, it needs to have the right facilities and be in the right situation; an explanation of why this is not the case is included in this response. Furthermore, any future new incumbent in this benefice will have four other open church buildings in which to hold worship, and which will demand their time and energy in governance and maintenance. None of these churches has a congregation which is numerous or strong, so the incumbent will face a serious challenge in helping to sustain these other four, let alone trying to save a fifth which has no congregation or officers. This incumbent will be one of 3.5 stipendiary posts in the whole deanery. Finally, due to diocesan financial constraints, it is unlikely that any new incumbent will be appointed before late 2024 or early 2025.

As there is no congregation at Westgate, it is not only revitalisation that is needed here; this issue is actually whether a new incumbent might be able to take the lead in planting a new church in the village. If they could provide some capacity and leadership for a church plant, however, other more suitable community buildings are available in which to do that (for example, the local Vineyard Church have met in the past in the Village Hall, which is more accessible).

Therefore, the question actually being asked is this: will a future incumbent, who will not be in place for 18 months or more, be able to bring significant capacity to trying to plant a new congregation in Westgate church building, and see a real benefit from doing so, when none of the other necessary conditions in support of such a venture are in place, and while they will have other huge demands on their time? It seems clear that it is entirely unrealistic to imagine that a new incumbent "will be able to revitalise the church".

There are indeed a number of retired clergy in the area, though none of the ones who will remain in the benefice by the end of June live in Westgate village. One who has been resident in Westgate is moving to Scotland and was only offering up to lead one service per month due to increasing infirmity. Retired clergy are willing to assist in the wider benefice, and they do; however, there is simply no congregation for them to lead in worship in this place, not any prospect that this will be the case, while their time is usefully employed leading worship in the church buildings where there are congregations.

With regard to the readiness of people to attend services at Westgate church, please see the response to question 1 above. Consideration has been given to worship at other times in the

week, with services offered on a Monday in Heatherycleugh, a Wednesday in Stanhope, monthly on Friday in Stanhope (Bread Church), and occasionally in Frosterley Village hall (Breakfast church done jointly with the Methodists).

5. Please comment on the church's accessibility. How does it compare with other local churches?

Reference has been made to the accessibility of the church being as good as Heatherycleugh and Stanhope. In fact, there is an uneven dirt track to the church door up a significant incline with steps to the door itself that are uneven and steep. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to create access for people with mobility issues through the introduction of a ramp, temporary or otherwise. It would require significant engineering work to improve access to the church building and given the finances there, this is unviable. Additionally, the building is in a poor state of repair and is impossible to heat with the current arrangements.

Heatherycleugh's safeguarding officer is an electric chair user and has easy access into Heatherycleugh church. Stanhope church has temporary ramps easily accessed when needed.

6. Please also comment on the representors' suggestions for alternative ways in which the church could be used which would mean it did not need to close.

There are many events held in a well-used village hall. Issues of accessibility make the use of Westgate church as a concert venue and centre for music (both church musicians in Weardale are in their late 70s/early 80s now) impractical. The existing curates have had no requests for midweek services, and evensong attendances at Westgate were exceptionally poor [on two occasions just the then Reader and the organist (Alec Peart) in attendance]. Before 2019 worship was offered monthly there at 3pm, with very small congregations in attendance (often half a dozen or less, and two of those attendees have now died).

7. What proportion of the church's congregation would be willing to travel to Saint John's? Is the example given of only one congregant from the closed church at Rookhope traveling to another church a valid comparison?

A retired clergy person and his wife who live in Westgate currently worship elsewhere around the benefice. They are about to move to Scotland later this year. The last churchwarden worships in Stanhope, and occasionally in St John's Chapel. One member of the PCC in Heatherycleugh parish lives in Westgate. There are others who have static caravans in Westgate who worship in St John's Chapel and Stanhope regularly when they are in the Dale. Were anyone unable to get to worship elsewhere, home communions are offered, as well as the provision of a lift.

8. Please explain The Vineyard Church in Westgate's place in the worship within the parish.

Ecumenical working is impractical. The Methodist chapel closed in Westgate many years ago, and indeed Methodism is in a state of collapse in Weardale and not for want of places to meet. The Vineyard Church in the Dale draws from a very large area and moves around different buildings regularly, currently using a building in St John's Chapel, having ceased using the Westgate Village hall.

9. Would you be prepared to put the proposed closure on hold so that the potential for an invigorated church community can be explored within a new Deanery plan? If not, why not?

With regard to the potential to start a new worshipping community in Westgate, there are better buildings in the community in which to start such an initiative, were the energy there to do it. Were there the potential to do something with young people there, the last churchwarden of Westgate would have been the person to build that activity. This too is unrealistic.

10. Are there any other factors which the Commissioners should be aware of in their consideration of these representations?

General Comments

We have tried to respond fully and fairly to the questions asked. In summary, we do not have any evidence that there are local people able and willing to be the officers of this church, or form a congregation (and it must be understood that this, not "revitalisation", would be required: there is no congregation currently). For a new worshipping church body to begin to use this building and maintain it, there would have to be a new church plant. We see no capacity, energy or leaders currently for such a church plant. If there were such energy, we think it more likely that it would be used to bring revitalisation to one of the other four churches in the benefice, all of which are struggling. Even if a situation arises in which a church plant was ventured in Westgate, this building would not be a sensible choice for its location.

In considering what information to include in your reply, I should be grateful if you would bear in mind that the Commissioners are now required to consider the representations under the quasi-judicial process laid down by the 2011 Measure. A legal challenge may arise from the Commissioners' decision if, among other things, it is based materially on incorrect information. In some cases, this might necessitate the withdrawal of the Scheme. Of necessity, the Commissioners rely on others to provide the information to assist their deliberations and to this end I should be grateful for your help.

I am hoping that this matter can be discussed at the **26th July 2023** meeting of our Mission, Pastoral and Church Property Committee. If the matter is to be discussed at that meeting, we will need to receive your response by **Friday 23rd June** please. This is to allow time for this letter and your reply to be considered by our Sifting Panel, to determine whether the representors and diocesan representatives should be offered an opportunity to make oral representations to the Committee, and for them to be sent to the representors, for them to make any further comments and, if necessary, for you to respond. As you know we also ask representors if they wish to speak to their representations to the Committee.

If a hearing is to be held, there will also be an opportunity for you or a diocesan representative to attend and speak in favour of the proposals. The diocesan representative may be any appropriate person (e.g. the Chairman or a member or the Secretary of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee or an Archdeacon) but should not be the Diocesan Registrar or other legal representative. We do not wish the Mission and Pastoral Measure process to take on the characteristics of an adversarial tribunal and have advised the representors that they too should not be legally represented. If a hearing is held, anyone may attend the meeting(s) of the Commissioners that considers the case and representors may have an opportunity to speak to the Committee(s) concerned. Otherwise, if a hearing is not to be held, the case will be considered in private and you will be informed accordingly.

It would be helpful if you would indicate whether in principle you would wish to attend or send a representative to speak at the Committee although I understand that you may not wish to make a final decision about this until you know whether or not there will be a hearing.

If there is a hearing in person, a local representative would be willing to attend.

We would normally expect the representations to be considered at the earliest opportunity but please let me know if you are unable to meet the timetable for the July meeting or wish to give the matter further consideration or undertake further local consultations before replying. Once we have informed the representors of the meeting date (which we will do when sending them a copy of your reply) we would hope not to have to defer it. However, all parties will have the right to ask us to defer the matter to a subsequent meeting if justifiable reasons arise.

I have copied this letter to Paul Stringer and the Archdeacon of Auckland.

Yours sincerely

James

James Davidson-Brett

Sub-Committee visit to the benefice of Upper Weardale

1. Three members of the Committee (Flora Winfield, Stephen Trott and Shane Waddle) visited Upper Weardale on 11 September, accompanied by staff (Wendy Matthews, James Davidson-Brett and Everarda Slabbekoorn). The Sub-Committee visited all four of the open churches in the benefice as well as Westgate's church hall. A map of the area is attached for reference purposes.
2. After arriving at St Thomas, Heathery Cleugh, members met Mr Peart and Mrs Buchanan – the two representors. Also in attendance were representatives from the diocese: Paul Stringer (Diocesan Pastoral Secretary) and The Venerable Rick Simpson (Archdeacon of Auckland). The building was in a good condition.
3. The Archdeacon explained that the four churches in the five-parish benefice were served by one priest who had recently left. Two other churches in the benefice (Frosterley and Rookhope) had been recently formally closed under the Measure. There was a lack of a large worshipping community in the area and a difficulty in filling parochial offices in the parishes. The Deanery Plan affecting this benefice had recently changed with the possibility of it moving to another Deanery and this period of uncertainty and flux has not made it easy to find clergy to serve in the area. The Archdeacon said that retired clergy cover Sunday services but re-iterated that PCC governance and problems with the church buildings were an issue in the benefice.
4. Mr Peart spoke about the very parochial nature of the populace, their reluctance to even come forward at services to take Communion, their unwillingness to step-up to fill PCC offices and their view that the administration and technological competence required was too much of a burden. He went on to say that people were reluctant to 'clog-up the Commissioners' inboxes' with letters of representation regarding the proposal.
5. When asked if the diocese had considered appointing a Deanery Treasurer the Archdeacon replied that it had not and that it would be a difficult post to fill. There were 3.5 clergy posts in the Deanery and no increase was possible but there were local retired clergy with PTO.
6. Both Mr Peart and Mrs Buchanan confirmed that they were not among the 25 people who attended the Public Meeting that was held to discuss the future of the church. It was Mr Peart's understanding that the Meeting was somewhat dominated by a lady who was very forceful in her belief that St Andrew's should be closed. They both thought that there was potential for a use for the building and that the church was a vital part of local rural life.



Entrance from
main road to St
Andrew's
church





Along the path
to St Andrew's



Looking back to
the entrance to
St Andrew's



Steps up to St Andrew's church

Recent Register entries St Andrew's

Register of Services

SPCK-Mowbrays

Copyright

Date	Day	Hour	Service	Officiant	Comm n i c a n t s	Atten d a n c e	Preacher	Collections			Notes
25.8.18	SATURDAY	11.30	Holy Matrimony	V.T. Yent		150	V.T. Yent	60	80		Jessie Brown Polly Winterton
9.9.18	TRINITY 15	10.00	Holy Communion	Heather Ross	5	6	Heather Ross	23	00		
		11.15	Holy Baptism	Heather Ross			Heather Ross	66	00		ANITA FLORENCE Jennings
23.9.18	Trinity 17 (Harvest)	3pm	HARVEST EP	H. Ross		20	H. Ross	93	47		
14.10.18	Trinity 20	10am	Holy Communion	David Ross	7	8	D.R.	34	00		
4.11.18	All Saints Sunday	3pm	Evening Prayer	Heather Ross	5		H. Ross	35	00		
24.11.18	Christ the King	10am	Holy Communion	Heather Ross	19	20	H.R.	65	00		
9.12.18	Advent 2	3pm	Evening Prayer	Greg Ross	4		Gr	30	00		
17.12.18	W.I. Carols	7 P.M.	Carol Service	Bruce Sawyer	35			37	50		Donation from W.I.
23.12.18	Eucharist	10 P.M.	Carol Service - Communion EVENING PRAYER	Heather Ross	4		H.R.	15	-		
6.1.19	Epiphany	3pm	Communion (by ex)	Greg Ross	4		H. Ross	35	00		
13.1.19	Epiphany	10 P.M.	Eucharist	Antony Bell	5	6	Antony Bell	23	00		
10.2.19	4 before Lent	10am	Communion (by ex)	Heather Ross			H.R.	25	00		
17.2.19	SEPTUAGESIMA	3pm	EVENSONG	Greg Ross	7		Gr	28	00		
17.3.19	2nd in LGNT.	10 P.M.	EUCCHARIST	Antony Bell	3	4	H.R.	16	00		
31.3.19	Motoring Sunday	3pm	EVENSONG	Heather Ross	3		H.R.	18	00		
14.4.19	PALM SUNDAY	3pm	EVENSONG	Greg Ross	6		PASSION READING	26	00		
21.4.19	Easter Day	3pm	Communion (by ex)	Heather Ross	5	7	H.R.	46	00		
5.5.19	Easter 3	3pm	Evening Prayer	Heather Ross	3		H.R.	30	-		
19.5.19	EASTER 4	10am	Holy Communion	Antony Bell	7	8	A.B.	35	00		

Date	Day	Hour	Service	Officiant	Communicants	Attendance	Preacher	Collections		Notes
16.6.19	Trinity Sunday	3pm	Evening Prayer	Heather Ross		6	H. Ross	30	00	
30.6.19	Trinity 2	10am	Holy Communion	H. Ross	22	23	H. Ross	100	00	
14.7.19	Trinity 4	10am	Eucharist	H. Ross	13	14	H. Ross	46	00	
18.8.19	Trinity 9	3pm	Eucharist + Baptism	H. Ross	7	53	H. Ross	134	18	
23.8.19		12pm	FUNERAL	H. Ross		110		181	79	Mrs. Eucumar Ayley Baptised Carol Ayley RIP
21.9.19	Saturday	12pm	Wedding	H. Ross		100		240	24	Andrew Newton + Charlotte Burnett
22.9.19	Trinity 14	10am	HARVEST	H. Ross		10	H. Ross			
6.10.19	Trinity 16	3pm	EVENSONG	Greg Rowl		4	G	25	00	
20.10.19	Trinity 18	3pm	Communion (by ext)	H. Ross	1	2	H. Ross	10	00	
7.11.19	Thursday	1pm	FUNERAL	H. Ross		240		210	90	ELSIE FAIRLESS RIP
17.11.19		3pm	NTS + READING	A. R. R. R.		4		25	00	
22.12.19	Sunday Adv. 3	3pm	Carol Service	Heather Ross		33		103	30	
12.1.20	Baptism of Christ	3pm	Evening Prayer	Heather Ross		2		10	00	
In 2020 services were suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic										
21/12/2020	Monday	12noon	Funeral	M. Lella		30	(number limited by pandemic)			NEIL FAIRLESS RIP Thomas Gregory Lorna Craig
21/01/2021	Saturday	11.30am	Wedding	Dick Foley						
1/8/21	Sunday	12noon	Baptism	H. Ross	37		H. Ross	56	10	Luke Brown Frederick Brown
23/11/21	Monday	2pm	Funeral	H. Ross		76				Jennie Huggill RIP Robert Jones Paul Reddick McKay
13/2/22	Sunday	12 noon	Baptism	H. Ross		30		28	70	

Date	Day	Hour	Service	Officiant	Communicants	Attendance	Preacher	Collections		Notes	Date
20/4/22	Wednesday	11am	Funeral	Heather Ross	35		H. Ross	155	81	SARAH MILDRED LANSDALE (RIP)	
15/5/22	Sunday	12noon	Baptism	Heather Ross	20	40	H. Ross	143	50	NORAH AMELIE WOOD	
5/6/22	Sunday	3pm	Platinum Jubilee Service	Heather Ross	25		H. Ross	115	90		
20 th September 2022	THURS	8.00	Communion	Heather Ross	8		P.A. Greenhalgh	23	10	Hm The Queen RIP James John Ayley	
25 Sep 22	Sunday	Noon	Baptism	Heather Ross	55		H. Ross	77	40	Jean Heatherington	
6 Dec 22	Tuesday	4.30	Funeral	Heather Ross	120		H. Ross				

Photographs of the other churches visited



St Thomas Heathery
Cleugh

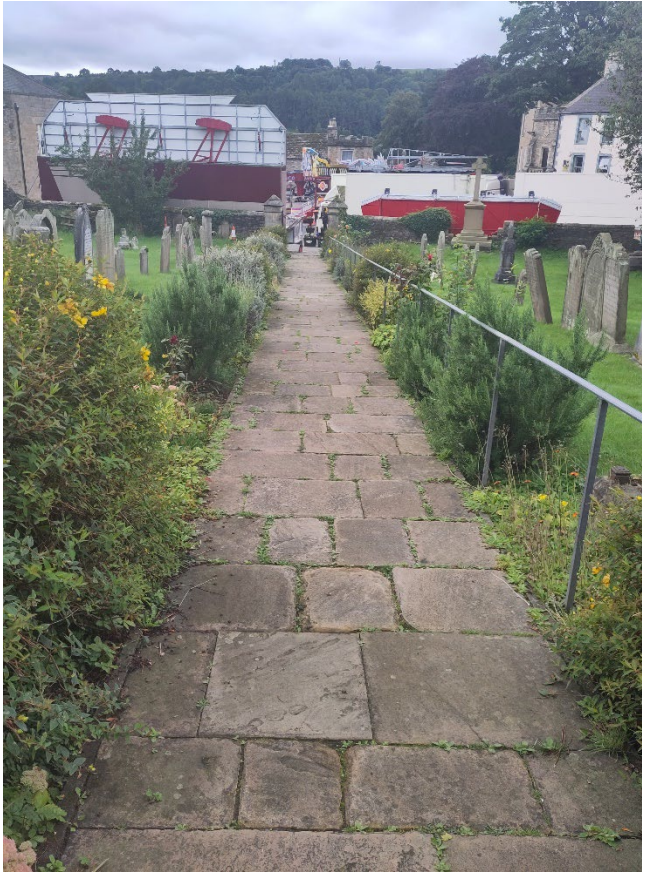


St John the Baptist, St John-in-Weardale





St Thomas, Stanhope



Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Draft Scheme recommending closure of St Andrews: Westgate Church in the Benefice of Upper Weardale and the Deanery of Stanhope.

This response is against the proposal for reasons of factual inaccuracy, the wider context of the decision and offers constructive alternative proposals for the future of this church.

The nature of my interest in the proposals is that I am a member of the PCC of St Thomas: Heatherycleugh, on the Electoral Roll of St Thomas: Stanhope, a regular worshiper at all the available church services across the benefice, I am a local employer and take an active pastoral role in the local community as a lay person.

An opportunity to speak with the Commissioners would be most welcome.

The process for discerning whether a church should close is recognised to be a relatively long one. There have been significant changes since the draft proposals were initially envisaged and these change the facts of the rationale and offer the potential for an alternative solution which could provide positive outcomes for the Diocesan Strategy and the local community.

It is worth noting that I have been a churchwarden and team ministry council member in a multi-parish benefice, the size of the Deanery of Stanhope, in the Diocese of Chelmsford during the time when the current Archbishop of York was the Diocesan Bishop encouraging a transformation strategy for the diocese. I have also served as Lay Chair of Deanery Synod in the Diocese of Norwich during a period of similar transformation. The Diocese of Durham is now actively encouraging parishes and deaneries to embrace its own transformation strategy and I believe the current proposals are not in tune with the current Diocesan Strategy. Rather, this benefice has been suffering from a period of difficulty, is weary and has become inward looking and focussed on the more secular aspects of simplifying administration and reducing its mission and worship footprint.

Factual Inaccuracy

The Draft Scheme states that the rationale behind the proposals is as follows: *“Closure is proposed because, sadly, there is no longer any regular Sunday congregation at St Andrew’s church, Westgate, and it has proved impossible for the parish to find Church Officers and PCC members, so the governance of the church cannot be maintained. The possibility of creating a Festival Church has been explored, but the church has poor accessibility and there was very little local interest in this option. Closure therefore seems the only sensible proposal.”*

- It has not been possible to determine whether any congregation is available as there have been no services offered at St Andrews since 2019. The 2 special services for her late Majesty the Queen’s Jubilee and subsequent celebration of her life did garner congregations, as have more recent pastoral services including a funeral with over 100 congregants.

- It is possible to form a PCC immediately and in fact has been possible for the last 3 years. I myself have offered to stand as Churchwarden on more than one occasion. There is a Treasurer in place and at least one other willing to stand as Secretary. There are new residents who have indicated their interest in supporting the church in this way. There has been no opportunity for a PCC to be elected as there has been no Annual Meeting of Parishioners and no APCM for such an election to take place and none is planned for 2023. The reason given for this is a statement that, “it has been decided that Westgate is closing”.
- The accessibility of the church building is no less difficult than either St Thomas, Heatherycleugh or St Thomas, Stanhope within the benefice.
- There is considerable interest in exploring alternative options to secure the future of St Andrew: Westgate. However, the attitude of the Priest-in-Charge (who has now resigned her post and is leaving on 23rd April 2023) has been that a decision has been taken and therefore no discussion will be had about alternative futures.

Context

The Deanery Plan which envisaged the closure of St Andrews: Westgate, was approved prior to the appointment of a new Priest-in-Charge. Upon her appointment, the Priest-in-Charge decided not to accept the Deanery Plan. Instead, a different plan was proposed and subsequently rejected by every benefice in the Deanery. Between her appointment and resignation, the Priest-in-Charge had two lengthy periods of sick leave and had to contend with the challenges of the Church of England response to the Covid pandemic. As a result, the level of engagement with the church leader in this benefice has necessarily been very low and this has had a very detrimental effect on the wider community's engagement with church. With the confirmed departure of the Priest-in-Charge, the benefice and the deanery are now actively engaging with the new Diocesan strategy of transformation. A new deanery plan is being discerned, which also proposes the combining of Heatherycleugh and St John's Chapel (with St Andrews: Westgate) as a single parish with two places of worship, with the assumption that the draft Scheme will be implemented.

The proposed closure of St Andrew: Westgate, therefore has a significantly different context than when first proposed. The broader proposal is to create a single parish with a large, rural population with many tiny, remote settlements and no public transport on a Sunday. The practicalities of a very rural, farming community being able to engage with worship offered at a single 10am Sunday service are challenging to say the least.

As is frequently the case, the rural population have strong attachment to their parish church. The pastoral services are greatly valued when held in the parish church. With no parish church, these services and the associated mission opportunities will likely be lost to the secular alternatives.

The culture of the local church communities has become very inward looking and focussed on managing decline. There was a long serving, elderly churchwarden at Westgate who commanded the loyalty of the church community. Upon her death, the remaining church stalwarts no longer had the energy or motivation to continue and this is what led to the original proposals. During the process of discerning the future of the church, much has changed, with new residents arriving and the embryonic plans for a more welcoming church that are being encouraged by the Diocese.

The public meeting to discuss the closure of St Andrews: Westgate, was well attended. However, the culture of the local community means that people do not “put themselves forward” – people here are both proud and humble, they do not often volunteer their views or step forward in a public context. It is a tough environment, with a harsh climate within a UNESCO World Heritage site of great natural beauty and with many visitors. The potential for the church to provide a welcome and encourage new seekers in their spirituality and faith in each parish in this context is great. Many local people have a great faith but do not wish to be “in the pews” as part of a perceived “club” which is dominated by a few long serving and very hard working individuals. They do however, support the important special services such as Harvest and Remembrance as well as the major Christian festivals – when services are offered, which they have not been consistently in the past few years.

Constructive Alternative Proposals

St Andrews: Westgate, has a strong history of music, with a benefice choir and reportedly the best acoustic of any church in the deanery. It is also worth noting that there are a number of recently retired clergy with PTO who live in the benefice and are keen to offer their skills and talents in developing the life of the church. At least three of these have significant experience of working in rural multi-parish benefices and have much to offer.

There are a number of possible futures for this church that it would be wonderful to explore as an alternative to closure.

- Could the church be imagined as a new “mission community” – focussing on music, youth and the concept of pilgrimage? There is interest from new residents in offering alternative worship styles.
- There is also interest in using the church building for community activities, concerts and other types of Christian welcome, alongside services. This community has lost its last shop and post office.
- Could the church be a centre for ecumenical work – all congregations from the different denominations are struggling with numbers – perhaps we could work together to establish an outreaching and different Christian community?
- Could there be a “stay of execution” where we explore, within a new Deanery plan, the potential for an invigorated church community? There are at least 2 priests (retired with PTO) who are more than willing to offer services and a community which repeatedly asks for midweek, evensong or other services outside the “10am on a Sunday” pattern of worship.

Conclusion

It would be wonderful to explore the “art of the possible” for this church – both building and community. One has to ask, “where is God in all this decision making”?

Do we want to remain inward looking, seeking to be an organisation minimising its overheads and administration? Perhaps we might imagine a different future which returns to the gospel imperatives and attract a new community with different values and the energy to engage? Perhaps

we should be here to serve our local communities rather than expect them to travel to attend a church that no longer feels local or relevant?

Perhaps we could embrace the Diocesan strategy in imagining a new future for this church?

- **Challenging poverty** – this is a relatively poor, very rural community. Poverty is not just about money, there is poverty of opportunity, to meet as community, to learn, to work together to make life better. Could we offer community supportive activities, knowledge, access to expertise in the everyday challenges of life?
- **Energising growth** – could we build a new type of church community here, through a rural ministry church plant or other different style of worship offering?
- **Caring for God's creation** – we are already working at benefice level on an imaginative pilgrimage based engagement with our wonderful local environment and rich history, which itself has suffered great poverty, deprivation and the loss of former industries and work opportunities – could this church be a centre for local people and visitors alike in finding God through the beauty of creation here?
- **Engaging with young people** – might we find a way, perhaps through music and other creative offerings, to build a new young church community in this place?

Helen Buchanan, MBA (Mrs)

16th April 2023

The Church has been supported well by the community. Fund raising events were well attended. In 2019 the advent of Covid and the death of a key Church member had an impact on the running of the Church and events.

All services were cancelled and thus no one could attend the Church. This amounted to constructive closure of the Church by the Diocese. Two services have been held, one for the Late Queens jubilee and another to celebrate her life. There was some criticism for organising these services I am told. Funerals have taken place. No Parochial Church Council meetings have been called where PCC members could be elected. The financial status of the Diocese may have an influence on the policy of Church closure.

The ill health of the Priest in Charge has meant that very little general pastoral work has been possible in the parish of Westgate. This is important in rural parishes.

The public meeting showed that the community was interested in the Church and the Churchyard but the request for volunteers to contact the clergy if they were willing to be on the PCC got no takers. In a rural area people are reluctant to be pushy and need to be asked in person and persuaded to fill roles of this nature.

There are I believe potential PCC members and a healthy church as the demography has changed significantly.

Inaccurate statements such as "the Church has poor accessibility" are not acceptable. The Church is on a minor hill and access is no worse than Stanhope or Heatherycleugh or indeed Durham Cathedral. There is a demand for services especially Sung Evensong and also other events. Interest has even been made for a Rock Music evening. The church is regarded as a good concert venue. Imaginative use of the Church may be an answer.

Mr G Braithwaite was shown round the Church by myself and Mr Spraggon. He agreed to send me a copy of his report. I have not received this. In fact as I am the only remaining member of the PCC I feel I should have been kept informed of what was happening. I would volunteer to be a Church Warden again but I am not considered to be an acceptable person to hold the position.

There is support for this objection from other residents in the Benefice. Most Benefice residents however are not aware that the Church is a candidate for closure.

The notice inside the Church does not fulfil its function as the Church is locked. This invalidates the closure procedure.

The reorganisation of the parish by combination with St. Johns Chapel is unlikely to work. The people of Westgate will not travel to St Johns and will thus have no Church. The Vineyard Church did operate successfully in Westgate and therefore one would assume the parish Church should also be viable. The appointment of a good, hard working, rural Priest in Charge would be of great benefit. In my view rural pastoral work should not be done from a computer. I cite the closure of Rookhope Church as an example, where I believe only one person from Rookhope attends other churches.

I currently act as Treasurer/organist and carry out other duties. The Church needs to be available for use.

Yours sincerely

A E Peart,

Further Response to Draft Scheme for Westgate St Andrews Church Consultation

Summary

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Diocesan Response to the consultation on the Draft Scheme recommending closure of St Andrews: Westgate Church in the Benefice of Upper Weardale and the Deanery of Stanhope.

I was encouraged by the Church Commissioner's faithful summary of my initial response to the Consultation. Please note that I provided details of my experience by way of context and to demonstrate that it is possible to think differently about a challenging local situation, as I have been blessed to experience in more than one other Diocese.

The Diocesan response to Representations is as disappointing as it is predictable. It has been clear for some time that as far as the benefice leadership and governance bodies are concerned, St Andrews: Westgate is already closed. The statement that "Westgate is closed" has been used to justify why none of the governance set out in the Church Representation Rules 2022 has been undertaken and why no services are held. The Diocesan Response clearly demonstrates that the church in Upper Weardale is inward looking, cannot envisage that anyone outside the current "club" could be involved in new approaches and has challenges with the accuracy of the information it provides.

The Diocesan Response fails to address the key points in my initial Representation with regard to a changed context. It also fails to address specific questions posed by the Church Commissioners in your letter to the Bishop. In addition, the responses provided to specific questions contain factually incorrect information, which can be evidenced.

There has been a general failure of governance in the benefice for some years, with repeated instances of the Church Representation Rules being either ignored or implemented selectively to ensure the status quo.

The presence of an open, welcoming and "active within the community" parish church is about much more than servicing a regular congregation. The appointment of a priest is for the "cure of all souls" in the parish or benefice – not just a focus on those already within the pews. It is about building up God's kingdom, through "walking the talk", planting small seeds and what is generally referred to as "evangelism". The entire church community should all be working on this mission, every day with every person they encounter. Outside of a regular service pattern, the pastoral services (baptism, marriage and funerals) are vital to drawing people into the church and nurturing the vast ocean of spiritual need and exploration that exists. Offering alternative worship styles, special services with meaning for those outside a regular congregation, especially in a deeply rural context, events and teaching that might attract those who are "seekers" and other imaginative uses of the church building for the service of the community are all part of the picture. None of these concepts appear to be within the imagination of the Diocesan Response. The prevailing attitude appears to be that people must "come in" to a set service pattern, always at the same time on the same day, rather than the church going out to encourage people to engage.

Further Response to Draft Scheme for Westgate St Andrews Church Consultation

Overall, the Diocesan Response made very sad reading. I was minded to mark-up the entire response with comments throughout. However, since it was provided in pdf format that was not practical and it seems more productive to focus on the factual inaccuracies, partial truths and misperceptions contained within the answers to each question.

My comments are therefore set out against each of the questions posed, using your own numbering for ease of reference.

Question 1

The Parish Magazine for January, February and March 2020 provides the service rota for the Benefice and there is only one service advertised for St Andrew: Westgate in each month.

My understanding is that inclusion of proposals for the closure of a church should be within the Deanery Plan and is not simply a matter for the benefice in question. I made enquiries into the inclusion of the proposed Parish Measure in the Deanery Plan and was informed by the Secretary to the Deanery Synod that it was included. A copy of the Deanery Plan was not made available to determine the facts.

Question 2

The Notice concerning the current consultation was placed on Church noticeboards within the benefice. The parish newsletter included reference to the current consultation only after I had received the newsletter and pointed out that such reference was missing and should be included.

With regard to the Public Consultation meeting, it is true that I did not attend. However, I am not sure why that is relevant. I cannot find any social media posts advertising the meeting and was not aware of local advertising of the meeting at the time.

I approached the Priest in Charge on a number of occasions offering to stand for the PCC in Westgate and indeed to offer myself for election as Churchwarden if none other was forthcoming. Despite her assurances referred to in the Diocesan Response, the Priest in Charge was not willing to enter into any conversation with me on the subject, simply repeating that the decision had been made to close the church.

The retention of an open churchyard would appear to limit severely any future alternative use for the church building, should it be closed. A building with no outside space and access across a churchyard under the control of the Church Governance bodies would have little practical use.

Question 3

It is the case that I do not live in the parish of Westgate. It has not been possible for me to be on the Church Roll for the parish as no Church Roll has been updated since 2019 and there have been no services provided, under which I would qualify as a regular attender. It could be argued that I have attended 100% of services at the church since there have been none. I am on the Church Roll for

Further Response to Draft Scheme for Westgate St Andrews Church Consultation

both Heatherycleugh and Stanhope, since services have been offered which I have been able to attend in order to qualify. I imagine the Diocesan Response is aiming to demonstrate that I therefore do not qualify as a candidate to stand for election to a St Andrews: Westgate PCC or as Church Warden for that parish. However, the Churchwarden's Measure 2001 provides for such a situation in Rule 4, under which I could be appointed, should there be any real intent to form a PCC. There is a current Treasurer and there is a person willing to be Secretary to my certain knowledge. This is sufficient to form a PCC and from there I have no doubt we could encourage others to join us.

There has been no Annual Parish Meeting or Annual Parochial Church Council meeting at St Andrew: Westgate since 2019.

The minutes of a Special APCM held in September 2018 make interesting reading. There is specific reference to the need to "do church differently" and a moving statement in the AOB, concerning the late Elsie Fairless, whose death sounded the death knell for St Andrews: Westgate, which I replicate here in its entirety as it is worth reflecting upon as part of the context.

"Elsie Fairless stated that she is no longer able to continue in an active role organising fund raising events for the Church due to advancing age. Carol Graham asked for it to be noted in the minutes the huge debt of gratitude that Elsie deserves for all her tireless and selfless efforts for St Andrew's Church over many decades, not just from the present PCC but from all the Parishioners who have used the Church in many different ways over the years. It has been Elsie's determination to keep this spiritual light shining in the village that has kept St Andrew open to the present days and we all hope that now, in return, we can keep the church, the Church that she loves so much alive for her."

The Diocesan Response notes that a resident of Westgate is a member of the PCC at Heatherycleugh within the benefice. The emphasis throughout the response is on those living in Westgate. In a United Benefice it is not unusual for people to be involved in the other parishes than where they reside.

Question 4

The Diocesan Response does not answer the specific questions posed.

There is no comment on the view that recently retired local clergy would be willing to offer services. This is unfortunate as my husband is one of these and has PTO for the Diocese and has offered to conduct services at St Andrews: Westgate. When there was to be no Christmas or Easter service at Westgate, he specifically offered to take such a service and would have welcomed an altar. He was told that Westgate is closed and was offered no opportunity to officiate at major festivals elsewhere in the benefice.

There is no comment on the view that the readiness of people to attend services has not been tested as services have not been provided. No services have been provided since March 2020 other than the 2 special services noted in my initial response. The Diocesan Response refers to services

Further Response to Draft Scheme for Westgate St Andrews Church Consultation

outside a regular Sunday morning pattern in other churches within the benefice but not to St Andrews: Westgate.

The Priest in Charge's ill health has been a major contributory factor in the life of the church in Upper Weardale. With 2 extended periods of sickness absence and the major impact of the church's response to the pandemic, together with the attitude that St Andrews: Westgate is "closed" has meant no attempts have been made at garnering a congregation there.

The Diocesan Response is correct that it takes more than an engaged and energetic incumbent to revitalise or re-imagine a church community. There are lay people who wish to work on such an opportunity, myself included. There are also recently retired clergy, my husband included, who would be willing to explore the concept of a new church plant. Indeed, my husband and I have discussed and researched the potential for a model such as a Moot (which can be attached to the Church of England but outside the parochial governance system) or Iona community which might be established at St Andrews: Westgate. There are others who have indicated their interest in such a future. It would take time and careful discernment to understand how best this could be achieved. However, to reject such a possibility out of hand and to declare there is no congregation ever possible at the church seems to go against the entire mission of the church. To insist on an immediate link between those living in the parish and a potential future worship community is at variance with the position that people will travel to other churches to worship where services are offered within the benefice. A potential new worship community could be attracted from a wider area if alternative worship styles, suitable services times and a welcoming attitude were in place.

However, the attitude of those in leadership and governance positions in the church here are not willing to embrace new people with new ideas. My experience has been that there are continued complaints from those who have served for a long time and are weary but that any offer to walk beside them and share the perceived burdens is soundly and often aggressively and unkindly rejected. Suggestions for alternative worship styles or services are not welcome. The view, openly articulated by the Interim Rural Dean at a meeting to discuss the Quinquennial Report for Heatherycleugh, is that anyone "not in the pews" cannot be invited to participate in church life. I have written email correspondence that supports my view and have been deeply hurt by such correspondence from the former Priest in Charge as well as those on the Heatherycleugh PCC.

The assertion that there are other buildings more suitable for a church plant is simply an opinion. The Village Hall in Westgate has been mentioned. This building is no more accessible than the church and its main meeting room is on an upper floor.

Question 5

The claims about the accessibility of the church are factually incorrect. The path to the church is not a dirt track. The path is no longer than those at either Heatherycleugh or Stanhope. Stanhope also has significant steps at the main entrance. St Andrews: Westgate has a rear door into the Vestry without large steps should there be a particular need. Should it be helpful, photographs could be taken of all 3 places and provided to you.

Further Response to Draft Scheme for Westgate St Andrews Church Consultation

It is quite possible to create a ramp, similar to that at Stanhope at a low cost.

The building is not in a poor state of repair and has a heating system as adequate as all other churches in the benefice.

Question 6

The Diocesan Response appears to assume that alternative uses of the church would be confined to those in the current church community. This is unhelpful and demonstrates the lack of an open minded approach to the consultation process. The reference to “both church musicians in Weardale being in their late 70s/80s” is particularly strange and irrelevant. There are many more than 2 people who are within the church community in the benefice who have musical talents.

There has been approach by younger new residents interested in more contemporary music opportunities within the church, just as one example. The intent of considering alternative uses for the church is to foster a new church community, particularly amongst those who are younger and not currently attracted by the traditional offerings of services and worship within the benefice.

Question 7

I have no comment to offer about this question.

Question 8

The statement that “Ecumenical working is impractical” is astounding. Perhaps I am just ignorant of the intended meaning of this statement.

There is in place a formal arrangement within the benefice for joint working with the Methodist church, approved by the Bishop. It may be helpful to provide some specific examples of recent ecumenical working within the benefice:

- At Christmas 2022, it was stated that there would be no Midnight Mass as the Methodist church was holding that service;
- On Christmas Day 2022, the service at Stanhope was conducted by the Methodist Minister alongside the retired Bishop who usually officiates at this service.
- The churchwarden at Heatherycleugh wrote to other members of the PCC explaining that he would not attend that Sunday’s service as he would be attending a joint service with the Methodists and he felt it was more important to support ecumenical services.
- The Pentecost service was even more widely ecumenical, including the other denominations.

The statement that the Vineyard church draws a congregation from a wide area, rather than being an objection, is precisely the vision I am suggesting might be explored for St Andrews: Westgate if there were a more inclusive and open-minded attitude.

Further Response to Draft Scheme for Westgate St Andrews Church Consultation

Question 9

The Diocesan Response appears to be clear that the answer is “no”.

As to the secondary question of “if not, why not?”

There is no indication as to why other buildings would be considered more appropriate.

There is an assumption that the only energy for such a potential future must come from within the current “church club”, or a new incumbent who would have more pressing matters to attend to. This is an entirely false assumption. Perhaps the discernment process for a new incumbent should be exploring how to create a re-invigorated church in Upper Weardale, rather than looking to perpetuate the existing model.

The assertion that if there were the potential to work with younger people the only person who might be considered to do so is the former churchwarden demonstrates the inward, closed attitude currently prevailing and fails to recognise that there are others in the Weardale Community who have something to offer. We have a new, stipendiary curate about to be priested, who is young, energetic and open-minded. Perhaps he might be enthusiastic to nurture new opportunities alongside those of us in the lay and recently retired community who are passionate about mission and trying hard to live the gospel imperatives.

Conclusion

I would welcome the opportunity to speak with the Mission, Pastoral and Church Property Committee. However, as a direct result of an unfortunate incident which took place at the Benefice Easter Vigil Service, I am suffering with a condition which means I am not currently able to travel long distances or encounter city environments with large numbers of people.

It seems inevitable that with the current determination to be inward-looking, to consolidate an aging, declining current church community into fewer places of worship and fewer parishes and an attitude that rejects any alternative approaches from those who do not wish to be part of a “church club”, that a decision will be made to close this church.

Perhaps the Church Commissioners would like to approach me after the formal process is complete to see what might be done to establish a new church community outside the parish framework within this building.

Helen Buchanan, MBA (Mrs)

Email: REDACTED

Tel: "

29th June 2023

From Mr Peart

Dear Sirs, I enclose my comments in response to the diocese/Bishop of Durham response to my objection..

Below is the copy of the email to the Priest in Charge referred to in my comments.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: A E Peart

To: Claire McClelland

Sent: Thursday, 18 June 2020 at 18:52:17 BST

Subject: Re: Westgate

Claire, I share your concern. I am unsure as to whether I now can be a Church Warden. I stopped taking Communion a number of years ago for various reasons. It became apparent that after the loss of Elsie Fairless, who worked very hard for the Church, Westgate was vulnerable. I took Communion in one kind on the required two occasions just before lockdown so that I was eligible to be Church Warden after Jo Hayes had resigned.

My role as treasurer was a result of the resignation of our previous treasurer. I was it seems considered to be Church Warden so had to fill the role.

I had hoped that with your appointment Westgate could attract more regular attendees.

The people of Westgate have given their support to the Church but have never filled the pews at regular services.

I feel there must be people in Westgate who would join the PCC. I do not know Westgate well enough myself.

These are my first thoughts and I hope it gives you a little insight.

Best wishes

Alex

His supplementary comments

Further to your email regarding the closure of St Andrews Church Westgate, I refer to the comments of The Bishop of Durham which in my view lack integrity of purpose.

There are no longer regular services because the Priest in Charge has not allowed these to occur and has effectively contrived to close the Church. The possibility of creating a Festival Church has not to my knowledge been explored.

I am the view that the response may infringe data protection and discrimination rules.

- 1) I think this is factually incorrect, from January 2017 to March 2020 weekly services were not held in the six Churches in the Benefice. The joint services were held usually on the fifth Sunday of the month.

This service pattern did not continue. On one or two occasions only the organist and Celebrant were present. The Church Warden did not attend. On one occasion if I remember correctly Covid was becoming evident.

Alternative services with St Johns had started some time earlier. The Church has Infra-red heaters and under pew heaters at the front and choir stalls so is reasonably warm for a large Church.

I play the organ at St Johns so the statement that no one from Westgate Church ever comes is untrue.

I make no comment regarding “the last person to be Church warden triggered the formal closure process”. The last Church warden did I understand resign without fulfilling the commitment.

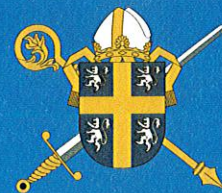
The notice on the door inside the outer porch was not particularly obvious from the road some distance away and may have been regarded as something other than an important notice.

- 2) The comment that there was general contentment. There is no explanation as to how this was assessed, if at all! I did not see any social media posts other than those directly associated with the Church.
- 3) I enclose an email to the Priest in Charge explaining that I had restarted to take communion in one kind to fulfil the requirement of the Church. This terminated due to Covid and shielding. It is significant that as a farmer who has work to do prior to attending Church my hands may be contaminated with animal droppings etc. and it is unwise to risk the spread of disease among the communicants.
- 4) The negativity of the response is noted. Retired Clergy have expressed interest in taking services at Westgate and I feel would attract people to attend and stimulate revival. (I give as an example the revival of Heatherycleugh Parish Hall which I worked to save from sale and which now is thriving) It is my belief that Clergy need to interact with the community as a priority. Westgate Church is a valuable asset in this work. I do not believe there is another building suitable and able to provide the inspirational impact of the Church. The Westgate village hall is up a flight of stairs with only two small rooms downstairs. The Church is in reasonable repair.
- 5) The heating is adequate for a large building as stated above.
- 6) This is not consistent with the earlier Bishop’s comments.
- 7) I make no comment, but there may be good reason for this. Westgate congregants have had to worship elsewhere due to the lack of service provision.
- 8)
- 9) Refers to better buildings but does not identify them.

The Bishop of Durham

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Rex Andrew
Pastoral
Church Commissioners
Church House
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3AZ

13 July 2023

Dear Rex,

Thank you for your email and attachments.

The following comments of response to both sets of supplementary comments are made by reference to the numbered points in Mrs Buchanan's supplementary submission:

Question 1

In respect of closure of the church and the deanery plan, a new deanery plan was effected in June 2023. There was no mention of closure of individual churches within that plan. Deanery Synod determined that was a matter for Parochial Church Councils to decide.

That is as it should be. Had the Deanery Plan included an intention to close Westgate St Andrew this might offer evidence of some deliberate and manipulative prior intention (locally, at deanery or diocesan level) to do this. There has, however, been no such intention nor plan. Consultation on closure was initiated instead largely as a recognition of the reality that there was no longer any meaningful church community at Westgate St Andrew. We are clear that, in the normal course of events, it is the PCC as the governing body of a church which needs to initiate a consultation about potential closure. In this instance, however, the Archdeacon and incumbent wrote to the DMPC to initiate this consultation precisely because there was no longer a functional governing body nor any Church Wardens at Westgate St Andrew who could do so themselves.

Question 2

We believe that our earlier submission makes clear that the proposals were known about locally and there no support for maintaining the church was offered; we do not see evidence of any change here to a level of support realistic for the church building being sustainable.

Question 3

Mrs Buchanan is right in saying that, "In a United Benefice it is not unusual for people to be involved in the other parishes than where they reside." However, the reality has been that neither residents of the parish nor of the benefice have wanted to take up the essential governance roles in the church, nor attend services, nor initiate new forms of mission within the building of Westgate St Andrew. She has stated her belief that there are now people willing to do this, but evidence of who these people are has not been provided. The Area Dean and Archdeacon do not yet see evidence that a PCC could be formed, nor that



Diocese of Durham

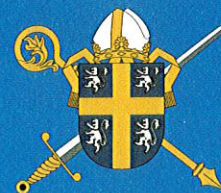
Blessing our communities in Jesus' name



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the finances necessary for maintaining the church will be forthcoming locally. They also do not see— even if a depleted version of a PCC could now be formed – why this would be advantageous to the mission of the church in the benefice when the building of St Andrew's church is not well suited to serve that mission.

Question 4

The Reverend Mr Buchanan retired on health grounds and has permission to officiate, not a 'right to officiate'. While on Heatherycleugh PCC, he was offered by Mrs Buchanan to do a number of tasks in relation to the quinquennial inspection works, eight months on these remain, in the main, undone. Mrs Buchanan also resigned from Heatherycleugh PCC subsequently.

Question 5

Attached photographs show access issues for Westgate church, a gravel track, undermined by rabbit burrows, to five steps for the main entrance, and uneven ground and two steps to the vestry for the other entrance suggested by Mrs Buchanan. The village hall has a room accessed via one step from the street which would comfortably seat 10-15 people. There is also a pub in the village.

Access to Stanhope includes ramps which are brought out as necessary, with plans for more permanent DDA compliant access in the works and affordable for that parish. Heatherycleugh and St John's Chapel churches are regularly accessed by wheelchair users. St John's Chapel church is particularly easy to access via a short footpath which is flagged, straight into porch and church with no steps. Heatherycleugh is accessed by a plastic grid embedded into gravel on a slope running down into the Church with a ramp. You can see the slope to the right hand side of the picture attached. Photographs of access to Heatherycleugh and St John's Chapel churches are attached.

Question 6

There was no assumption on our part about the nature of future uses – traditional or innovative. We are very open to new forms of church and mission (see Q9). We simply do not believe the church building of St Andrew is useful for these. Furthermore, seeking to maintain a building that the community have made clear they do not value is a drain on the very resources that can be used (and are being used) for exactly the kind of work Mrs Buchanan is advocating.

Question 7

No supplementary comment.

Question 8

We think Mrs Buchanan has misunderstood our point: ecumenical working in this building is impractical. The benefice works very well with the Methodist church locally, but this building is not useful for their shared activities.

Question 9

Mrs Buchanan makes a repeated claim that the diocese's view about the future of the building at Westgate St Andrew is due to a lack of will at both a diocesan and parish level to engage in mission and ministry in new forms. This is untrue, and that can be evidenced as follows:



Diocese of Durham

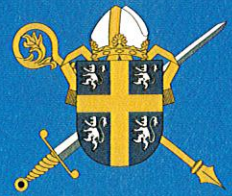
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The new stipendiary curate has started 'Boxing church' in the Church school in Stanhope, with a newly retired clergy spouse, a prison chaplain, and a lay member of Eastgate congregation assisting. The SSM curate in Heatherycleugh is currently running a praise service on Mondays in St Thomas' church Heatherycleugh. There is also the 'On the Way' service started by the previous incumbent, supported by a churchwarden from Heatherycleugh, and the Methodist Minister on Sunday afternoons once a month. The Interim Area Dean helps with 'Bread Church' in Stanhope monthly with a team of lay volunteers. All of this is on top of a monthly Sunday afternoon service in Stanhope for those who are unable to attend on a Sunday morning, and a Breakfast Church in Frosterley on a Saturday once a month. Each of these are attracting new engagement. With not having to maintain services in Westgate, this has freed off energy to have more regular worship at St Thomas' church, Stanhope, and with the increased regularity of services we are seeing growth in that congregation. There is ecumenical working, which is proving fruitful, but does not require the church building of St Andrew, Westgate.

The question at issue here is whether this building is well located, accessed and appointed to serve the mission of the church – especially with these new forms of mission. We have explained in our previous submission why it is not, and Mrs Buchanan has not offered any evidence to the contrary.

Additional Comments

A cursory inspection of St Andrew's church, Westgate revealed issues with pointing of the stonework in a number of places, leaking guttering to the rear of the church, and suspected damp within the sanctuary, a broken window to the rear of the church, another lead window bowing on the south side of the church, and some slates on the roof above the main entrance on the chancel roof that look uneven and I suspect will be leaking. The Village Hall appears to be in a much better state of repair and would not encumber a new worshipping community with significant maintenance issues alongside the issues of access.

A photograph of the social media advertisement of the Public Meeting is also attached.

With kind regards,

The Rt Revd Paul Butler
Bishop of Durham

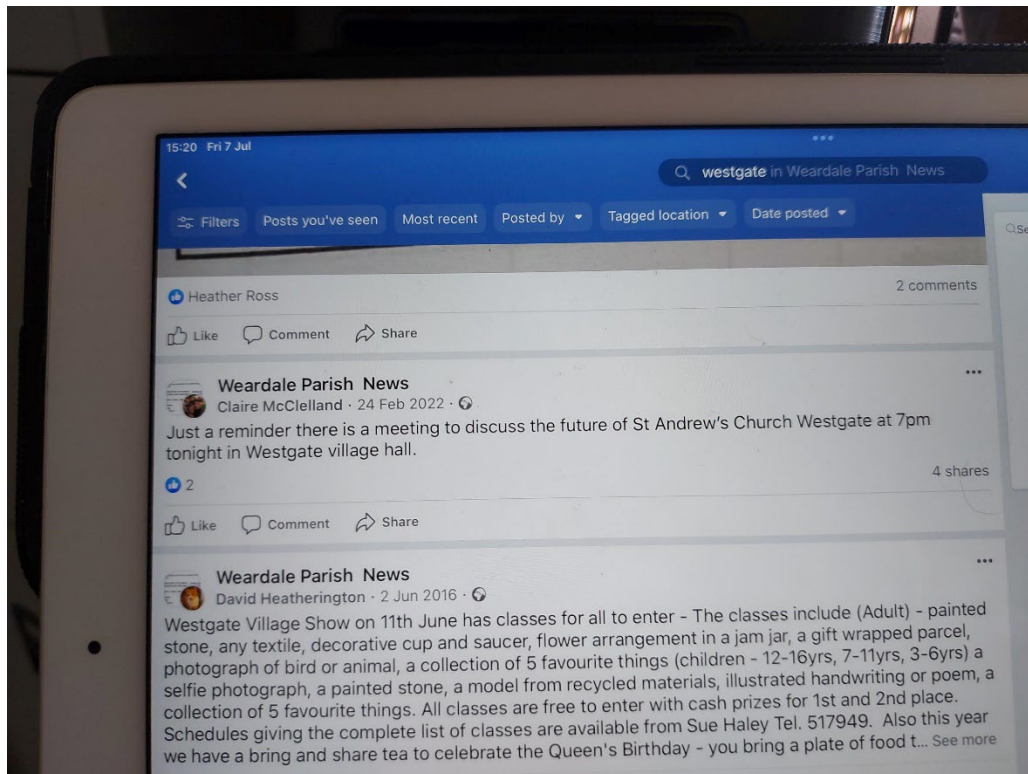


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Advertisement on social media of public meeting



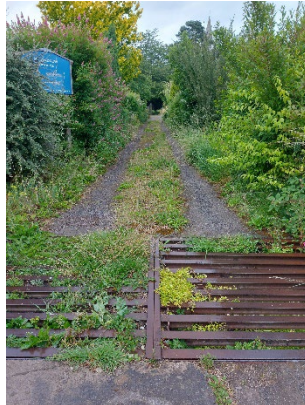
Heathercleugh church entrance from the road – path to the right of the photograph



St John's chapel entrance



St Andrew's church



Village hall taken from the entrance to St Andrew's church

Maintenance issues relating to St Andrew's

