

## **Annex S**

The black text is the supplementary response from the representor, Neil Hughes, and the red text is the diocesan response. The supplementary response was received late due to issues contacting the representor.

### **Lowther St Michael**

#### **Bishop's Response to Further Representations**

Diocesan responses are in red below.

Dear Joanna

Thank you very much indeed for sending me an update on progress with this matter, and for the documents you included with your mailing.

When the Commissioners' Mission, Pastoral and Church Property committee meets to determine an outcome on 30 April on 30 April it may also wish to consider the following:

1. Setting and tourism: there are numerous tourist attractions within the Lake district, where the building is situated, including the adjacent Lowther castle and extensive gardens. Where a church building is intrinsically attractive, either on account of its architecture or on account of its setting (the latter, on a hillside overlooking a fast-flowing river, being more applicable to Lowther) it is often also because it is a church i.e. a dwelling of God set in His lovely creation.

The proposed use of the building will enable the public to continue appreciating the church in its setting of the Lowther Park. We can only reiterate that the ecclesiastical parish has no pastoral need for the building, which has no remaining congregation, and the parish has no wish or capability to retain responsibility for the building. The proposed disposal to the estate is possibly the only option that will enable visitors to continue having full access to enjoy and appreciate the building and its setting.

2. Despite more than one request having been made by myself - and also, I believe, by the Archdeacon of West Cumberland whom Lowther Estates appear to have used as an intermediary in dealing with the case on account of a previous nearby incumbency - no plans, even draft plans, for the scheme have ever, as far as I'm aware, emerged. This means that as a local councillor I was asked to give backing to a change of use the nature of which was - and remains - largely unknown. The definition of intended future use of the building given by Lowther Estates is vague to say the least. If, for example, 'community' use is intended why has the albeit sparsely-spread local community not been involved at any stage in co-designing any proposals? Has the fact that the (civil) parish council of Lowther is unanimously opposed to any change of use as envisaged in the Scheme not been taken into consideration? If 'community use' really is proposed what implications might this have for the sustainability of Lowther parish hall, situated perhaps a mile-and-a-half away?

It is stated that the civil parish council is unanimously opposed to any change in use. We would note that Lowther Parish Council were included as an interested party to the initial consultation on draft proposals but made no representation either at that stage or subsequently to the publication of the draft scheme.

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The diocese would not consider that the use authorised by the draft scheme for “monument, cultural and community use” requires any modification or amplification.

However, the user clause of the draft lease does expand to provide for use “as a place for interpretation and learning, putting the Property in the context of the historic Lowther Park and its associations with the Lowther family; and as a place for arts music and other cultural and community events and subject to other restrictions in this Lease may include use for occasional acts of worship ancillary to the permitted use”

Provision needs to be made for “community” use to enable, beyond monument use, the range of activities to continue that would currently be possible in a church building. The events and “community” use are very much ancillary to the primary intention to retain the church as a monument in its setting. As previously advised the lessee envisages a programme of exhibitions, musical concerts and talks. That programme will be a matter for the lessee and not something where it would be appropriate to mandate any public engagement. It is difficult to envisage that those activities will conflict with the Lowther Parish Hall which caters for a different nature of groups, activities and party bookings.

3. During the pandemic St Michael's Lowther was the only church building in a wide area which remained open and accessible. Throughout that period a significant number of persons made available for themselves a rare, almost unique opportunity for unaccompanied private prayer within its spiritually supportive domain. I believe that this practice has continued since, and probably also did before, the pandemic though perhaps not in such a situation of great urgency, in an era in which so many active parish churches as well as those of other denominations remain sadly closed on weekdays in order one imagines to safeguard material contents.

The proposed use envisages the building remaining open and accessible to the public who would be able to use it as a space for private prayer should they wish. Once again, the proposed disposal is possibly the only one that could enable this.

4. The number and spread of special services of worship which the proposed scheme will permit at St Michael Lowther appears to be limited effectively to feast-days and others which the diocese may exceptionally permit. This seems to me unduly restrictive and I note from the diocese's own response to your enquiries that a previous Archdeacon debarred a similar previous initiative to part-close the church on broadly similar grounds. Such grounds do thus appear to have validity despite the fact that the current parish church lies only half-a-mile or so away.

This contains a factual misrepresentation. No Archdeacon has debarred any attempt to part-close the church. In the previous response to the representation we advised that attempts to lease the open church failed when the Diocesan Chancellor could not be convinced that the reserved rights of worship to be provided for by the lease would

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leave the building primarily as a place of worship as required for issue of a faculty to authorise the lease. That is not a material consideration in case of a closure.

The proposed scheme does not provide for any reserved rights for worship. They are to be provided for in the lease being agreed with the Lowther Estate. Once the lease is granted they will not be a matter for further permission from the diocese. The draft lease provides for the reserved right for the Incumbent and PCC to hold services on all Principal Feast Days and on six other days per year. This provision has been discussed and agreed with the parish and exceeds any foreseeable use that they intend to make of the church.



Neal Andrews  
Diocesan Surveyor and Pastoral Officer  
Sent for and on behalf of the Acting Bishop of Carlisle

22<sup>nd</sup> April 2025