

Church Buildings Council

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Our Ref: CARE 14/251

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Dear Geoffrey,

Ely, St Mary (Diocese of Ely) Proposed Reordering

Thank you for seeking the Church Buildings Council's advice over the proposed reordering at St Mary's, Ely. The Council is grateful for the opportunity to comment on the proposals at an early stage and for the invitation to a site visit carried out on 14 July 2017. The proposals were considered at the recent meeting of the Council. Its advice is set out below.

The Council welcomed the desire of the parish to open up the building for wider use, both as part of its mission and for other users in the community. The Council noted that St Mary's has recently become a Resource Church for the Ely Diocese and for deaneries in West Norfolk and Suffolk. It is encouraging to see that the church currently has a healthy growing congregation, attracting 200 people to the Sunday Family Service, 75 people to the Sunday communion and 28 to the Thursday Market Day Communion. The Council also noted that currently the church itself is mostly empty during the week, whereas the Church Halls are busy most of the time to the point of turning away potential bookings. This has led to reduced opportunities for both church activities and partnership activities with the church and community.

The Council understands that the increase in responsibility that comes with being a Resource Church and the aspiration to have more flexibility within the church have prompted the parish to propose a major reordering. This would include removal of the pews, pulpit, stone pulpit base, and choir stalls; relocation of the organ and font; as well as partitioning within the church to create a crèche, vestry, a storage room, a meeting room in the former vestry, and a servery in the

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south chapel. Proposals also include screening off the east end of the chancel, better accessibility, underfloor heating, lighting, a gallery at the west end, a new opening in the west wall of the south chapel and the provision of CCTV. The parish also wish to reconfigure and extend the 1980s extension on the south side of the church.

The Council welcomes the aspiration to provide better accessibility within the church for wheelchair users. The provision of solar panels on the south side of the church, which are not visible from the public realm, are also a welcome proposal. Similarly, the Council welcomes the addition of the proposed servery which could be used not only for services but for other events and for visitors to the church. However, the Council was not convinced of the need for the south chapel and servery to be screened off.

As a major driver of the proposed scheme is to accommodate a growing congregation by providing additional meeting rooms and storage facilities, it would seem that this is the perfect opportunity to look at options for the 1980s extension which is no longer fit for purpose. While the Council has no objection to the proposed alterations to the extension, members wondered whether the proposals were sufficiently ambitious. Total demolition and rebuilding could provide for the current and future needs of the church and reduce the extent of work proposed in the church itself. It would be worthwhile to talk to the Heritage Lottery Fund and other major funders to see if there is any possibility of funding for a potential redevelopment of this extension. More information can be found here: <http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/funding-and-grants/other-sources-funding>

The importance of the north door as the main entrance into the church could be accentuated in the proposed scheme. The north door is a focal point from Church Lane and this could be taken advantage of, drawing people through the impressive church to the halls and new office space beyond. This would be a more obvious and welcoming point of arrival to the church and could also be a means for attracting people who are visiting the adjacent tourist information centre and nearby cathedral. There appears to be no recognition in the proposals of the church's potential as a tourist attraction, which could become an important part of its mission.

The Council was concerned that the cumulative impact of the changes proposed internally would result in such a change to its character, that the harm to the special interest of the building would not be outweighed by the benefits. The parish has a nationally important historic church, listed Grade I, as such, there needs to be a more considered assessment of the significance of the building and its contents. The Statement of Significance should also include an assessment of the existing furnishings, so that they can be better understood: for example, whether the pews and choir stalls were designed specifically made for the church or were ordered from a catalogue. The pew ends appear to have been designed, or selected, to complement the style of the capitals of the arcade columns. (A comprehensive account of the 1879 restoration, including the various furnishings introduced at that time, can be found in *The Cambridge Independent Press*, 26 April 1879, p. 7.)

The Council is not opposed to relocating the font but does not consider the location in the north aisle, shown on the architect's plan, to be ideal, as it is close to the ramp leading up to the chancel. One location which was discussed on site was in front of the 1909 reredos at the east end of the south aisle, where it would sit well. The Council would not support removal of the font to the garden.

Guidance on fonts can be found here:

http://www.churchcare.co.uk/images/Guidance_Notes/Fonts.pdf

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More also needs to be understood with respect to the proposed new door opening in the west wall of the south chapel, including why this is needed, how it will be formed and any proposed impacts on the significance and fabric of the building including the windows above. The proposed change of the door from the chapel to the churchyard, from the present wooden one to a glass one, would also result in a change of character and would, at the very least, require very careful detailing.

The specific proposed uses within the church should also be outlined in the statement of needs so that it can be fully understood how often the church would be cleared of its seating and what the storage requirements would be. It may be that the chairs can be stacked out of the way to the side on the occasions that the nave is to be clear of seating. The Council was not convinced of the need to screen off the east end of the chancel and thereby obscure the historically interesting sedilia and piscina to provide a storage area and a vestry.

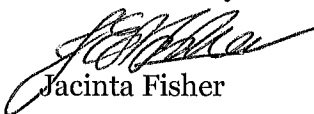
The Council would also urge the parish to consider looking at lowering the floors in the current or rebuilt extension, thus removing the need to increase the floor height within the main church building. If underfloor heating is to be installed, the Council would encourage reusing the existing heating channels and retaining the memorial stones to the west of the nave as archaeology may be an issue when digging down. If the church is to be refloored, careful consideration will need to be given to the materials and layout in order to avoid a monotonous uniform effect. Different materials, for example, could be used to reflect the historic layout of different parts of the nave. Care will also need to be taken to ensure that the bases of the columns, not just to the aisle arcades but also at the entrance to the south chapel, are not obscured by raised flooring. The Council welcomed the proposed reuse of the stone and tiles in the chancel.

Whilst the Council agreed that the proposed gallery is impressive, its proposed use and capacity should be addressed within the statement of needs to make sure that the potential gains would justify the cost of its provision as well as the space required for the staircase from the nave.

Finally, the Council would encourage the parish to develop a scheme which plays to the strengths of the internal and external space, for instance the proposed lighting scheme could highlight and accentuate the magnificent painted ceiling in the nave.

We look forward to hearing from you again about these proposals once you have had time to consider the Council's advice.

Yours sincerely



Jacinta Fisher

Cc: Christopher Hill, Team Rector
Nigel Walter, Arch Angel

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