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Your reference: **APP/D3125/W/23/3315925**

August 2023

Dear Sir / Madam,

Town and Country Act 1990 – Section 78 appeal
Freeland Methodist Church, Wroslyn Road, Freeland
APP/D3125/W/23/3315925

Freeland Parish Council is writing to **object** to the above appeal.

Our original objection submitted in September 2022 is attached, and having reviewed the Appellant's appeal submissions, we find nothing to justify removing our original objections.

In fact a review of the Appeal Statement has thrown up further concerns in relation to accuracy, as well as an unwillingness to engage with stakeholders or test the viability of community use, for which there is a valid and current planning permission already in place, by putting the Church on the market.

2 Planning history

The Appeal Statement, Para. 2.4, quotes from the Appellant's original submission, item (2):

"It does seem somewhat strange that the new Village Hall was not made large enough to accommodate the various organisations of the village, and one might assume that cost may have been a problem. Have things changed so much?"

The Parish Council would like to point out that the new village hall complex was designed with the help of an experienced Architect to allow for the needs of the various organizations of the village, as far as space allowed. The need for further space is a measure of the popularity and success of the new hall.

At the time the hall was planned and built (2010/11), it was still widely believed that any new development on the former shop site on Parklands would include a retail unit of some kind. (Approval had been granted under appeal for a redevelopment

of flats with a shop in 2004 (re 04/0568/P/FP) although this had lapsed by 2010.) It was only in 2019 when permission was finally granted for two 4-bed houses on the site of the former shop (18/03385/FUL), that the prospect of a shop on that site disappeared.

The possibility of including a shop within the new Village Hall complex was investigated at the time, but constraints such as the size of the site and the need for parking precluded an additional building on the site.

Para 2.4 continues: "It appears that a number of organisations which continued to let the church property may have done so in the light of the level of charges for use of the Village Hall."

It is supposition to suggest that organizations continued to let the Church property once the hall was completed due to the level of charges for the hall. A look at the bookings calendar for the hall will confirm the high level of use and reasonable cost of hiring the hall.

Section (3) continues

"- whilst we would not object to community ownership, we would point out that, although the Church may be in the heart of the "old village", it is nearly at the far end of a very long current village, and whilst being opposite the Garden Centre and the Public House, it could be difficult to see that there would be much of a passing trade;"

In reality the Pub, Garden Centre, St Mary's Church and the Village Hall complex form the hub of the village where many people go on a daily basis. The Methodist Church is situated at the heart of this village core.

The final paragraph of section 2, para. 2.12 states:

" Finally, it is relevant to note that a planning application relating to an adjacent site has been submitted to the Council, validated on 13 January 2023 (Council Reference 22/03356/FUL). This planning application seeks PP to construct 80 Class C3 residential dwellings, as well as providing buildings and space for community uses such as a community shop and café. This planning application is due to be determined in April 2023."

It should be noted that this application has since been refused by West Oxfordshire District Council.

5 Planning Balance, Summary and Conclusions

5.1 The Parish Council considers it to be a false assumption to state that the realisation of optimal value for this site can only be achieved by way of a dwelling house and that “..... *there was no other commercial, viable use in this location, confirmed later by a robust Viability Report.*” Ref. paras. 4.15, 4.16, 4.17

This Viability Report remains confidential and therefore untested and the opportunity to investigate an alternative to residential use has been blocked at every turn by the refusal to place the Church on the market, or even enter into discussions with the local community.

It should also be noted that the close proximity of the north side of the Church building to the Village Hall car park would lead to inevitable conflict of use due to noise and disturbance if the Church were converted to a dwelling.

5.3 The availability of alternative community facilities accessible to residents has been cited as a reason not to convert the church to such use. However, study of the Village Hall calendar illustrates the high level of use, and need for additional meeting space in particular. The Church would sit comfortably within this community setting and indeed its setting could be enhanced by being incorporated within the Village Hall complex.

Additionally, Local Plan Policy E5 of the Local Plan supports the retention of community buildings. They are a valuable resource to villages, limited in number, and once their use is changed that resource is lost permanently.

5.8 This paragraph concludes with the assertion that the Council's refusal of planning permission is “*based upon unsubstantiated and unjustified alleged harm to the Building and a “desire” of local residents to keep the building... for an unjustified, unviable, un-costed, unfunded, and unimplementable shop/café*”

To be clear – neither the Freeland Community Benefit Society or the Parish Council have been allowed the opportunity to refute any of these assertions since the building has never been put on the market. This would have given the opportunity to properly assess viability, costings, funding and implementation.

It should be noted that the Parish Council has a track record of bringing about excellent new facilities through fund raising, applying for loans and managing the build to an extremely high standard, as can be witnessed by the new Village Hall, the separate changing facility and the village play area. Additionally the Parish Council has paid off the Public Works Board loan for the changing rooms. At the same time

the Village Hall Management Committee have demonstrated the ability to efficiently manage and maintain the new buildings to a very high standard.

In summary, the combination of skills from the Parish Council, the Freeland Community Benefit Society and the Village Hall Management Committee would likely ensure a successful, sensitive and viable conversion of this Listed Building to community use, as allowed under the extant planning permission.