

PROPOSED CHANGE OF USE OF FREELAND METHODIST CHURCH TO RESIDENTIAL

PLANNING APPLICATION NUMBERS: 22/02377/FUL, 22/02378/LBC

OBJECTION RESPONSE BY: FREELAND PARISH COUNCIL, SEPTEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

This objection to a full planning application and Listed Building Consent by the West Oxfordshire Methodist Circuit for the conversion of the historic Freeland Methodist Church to residential use has been prepared by Freeland Parish Council in support of, and parallel with, the objection submitted by the Freeland Community Benefit Society.

This Objection identifies key issues which render the conversion of the Church to residential use fundamentally inappropriate.

Sections 1 – 4 of this response outline Freeland Parish Council's 4 objections in turn, whilst it should also be noted Freeland Parish Council support WODC's recent decision to grant renewed planning permission for the Church to be used for community purposes, including a shop, café and drop in centre.

OBJECTION 1

LOSS OF COMMUNITY USE

The proposed conversion of Freeland's Methodists Church to residential use would deprive the village of a unique opportunity to complete the rejuvenation of the historic village core [see Objection 2] and ensure the continued use of the Church for community purposes.

The Methodist Church was in continuous community use for a range of purposes until it was closed in April 2017. This facility is sorely missed by the village.

It should be noted that the Freeland Community Benefit Society (CBS) recently requested a meeting with the new Superintendent minister of the West Oxfordshire circuit. This was declined and the CBA was also advised that the church was still being used and there is no plan to sell at the present time. To the knowledge of the CBS and Parish Council no-one has been seen using the building since its closure, and this has been corroborated by numerous residents in recent months.

The Village Hall and the associated Newell Room provide superb facilities for both large and small groups respectively. However, these facilities are fully booked at times of peak demand e.g. weekday evenings and weekends. Additionally there is no space within them for a shop and they do not provide for the medium sized groups, previously accommodated in the Church. Alternative locations for a community facility are far inferior in terms of location, adaptability and relationship to the village centre.

In February 2018 WODC granted planning permission for use of the Church as a village shop, café and meeting place. This permission was subsequently renewed in August 2022. There is, therefore, no barrier to the continued use of the Church as community facility in planning terms.

Freeland's village shop closed many years ago and the long disused site has recently been redeveloped for housing, but with no provision for a replacement village shop, as previously required. The reuse of the Church to provide, inter alia, a community shop, has therefore been given further impetus.

This application for conversion of the listed Church building to residential use is, therefore, inappropriate, wasteful of a unique opportunity and contrary to the following planning policy:

Policy E5 of the WODC Local Plan 2031 states that:

“ The Council will support the development and retention of local Services and community facilities to meet local needs and to promote social well being, interests, interaction and healthy inclusive communities.

Development proposals that would result in the loss of community facilities and services will only be supported where it can be clearly shown that appropriate alternative provision of at least equivalent suitability and accessibility, particularly by foot, will remain.”

In explaining the background to Policy E5 the Local Plan states that:

“ This [the closure of local facilities] is a threat to the sustainability of our communities particularly in the rural areas where such facilities can form the hub of social life. In seeking to justify the change of use of local services or

community facilities, applicants will also be required to consider whether existing premises or sites can be adapted to retain a viable community facility or service."

It is clear, therefore, that the development of the Church for residential purposes, and its consequential loss as a valued community facility is contrary to current planning policy and as such should be refused.

OBJECTION 2

IMPACT OF RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT UPON LISTED BUILDINGS

Freeland's Methodists Church is a Grade 2 Listed Building. Built in 1807, the Church predates the adjoining Gothic Arts & Crafts Revival design set piece, which forms the historic core of the village. Designed for the Taunton family between 1869 and 1871 by the celebrated Architect John Loughborough Pearson (Architect for Truro Cathedral and New College, Oxford), the Victorian village centre includes St Mary's Church [a Grade 2* Listed Building], the schoolhouse, the Old Parsonage (a Grade II Listed Building) and the convent of the Community of St Clare. This grouping of buildings was skillfully inserted between a number of existing Cotswold stone buildings which are aligned at right angles to Wroslyn Road including the Oxfordshire Yeoman public house, Church Cottages, Upper Parsonage Farm and the Methodist Church.

The historic centre of Freeland village, together with The Green and Freeland House with its ancillary cottages, stables, walled garden and parkland setting are together worthy of designation as a Conservation Area. To this end the Freeland Community Led Plan, completed in 2014, proposed seeking Conservation Area status and the possibility was subsequently explored with WODC in 2017. (Figure 1)

Given the intervisibility of St Mary's Church and churchyard to the Methodist Church, it is apparent, therefore, that any form of change to the building and its surrounds will impact upon the historic setting of this Grade II* Listed Building.

The proposed conversion of the Church to residential use will require the insertion of a partial mezzanine floor and the subdivision of the ground floor into a number of small individual rooms which would detract from the appearance of the building both externally and internally. It is also likely that the mezzanine floor would have to be suspended on a freestanding internal frame, as the exterior walls could be structurally incapable of taking the loads. The insertion of this framework would further

exacerbate damage to the architectural integrity of the listed building and the internal and external appearance of the Church.

The proposal to create a 3 bedroom family house within the existing structure is incompatible with the almost total lack of useable external garden space. The area to the south of the Church being proposed as a gravel surfaced car park, whilst the north east rear 'garden' is in reality a leftover corner heavily overshadowed by the 2 storey Church building to the south, Grey Stones Cottage to the east, the Church utility extension to the west and a proposed 1.8m high wall to the north. The cramped nature of the plot and the proximity of public footpaths to 3 elevations mean residents would have little privacy.

By way of contrast, continued use as a community facility would enable the original character to be preserved and enhanced, with the double height building retained and the external appearance unaltered except for the reopening of the **lost doorway** to the south elevation. Additionally the open space to this elevation could be incorporated into the public realm of the village creating a social focal point. Policy EH9 of the WODC Local Plan 2031 states that:

*“ All development proposals should conserve and / or enhance the special character, appearance and distinctiveness of West Oxfordshire's historic environment, including the significance of the District's heritage assets, **in a manner appropriate to their historic character and significance and in a viable use that is consistent with their conservation.....”***

It is apparent, however, that the proposed conversion of this Grade 2 listed building to residential use would be both inappropriate and inconsistent with the buildings conservation, particularly given the existence of an approved alternative community use, which WODC have accepted as not causing harm to the listed building.

Policy EH11 of the WODC Local Plan 2031 also states that:

“ Proposals for additions or alterations to, or change of use of a Listed Building.....will be permitted where it can be shown to:

- *conserve or enhance the special architectural or historic interest of the buildings fabric, detailed features, appearance or character and setting;*

- *respect the building's historic curtilage or context or its value within a group and / or its setting, including its historic landscape or townscape context; and*
- *retain the special interest that justifies its designation through appropriate design that is sympathetic both to the Listed Building and its setting and that of any adjacent heritage assets in terms of siting, size, scale, height, alignment, materials and design and form. "*

It is apparent, however, that the proposed conversion of the Church to residential use would be fundamentally contrary to this policy by virtue of:

- *the changes that would be required to the fabric of the Listed Building*
- *the impact these changes would have upon the internal and external appearance of the building.*
- *the adverse effect upon the historic core of Freeland village, and in particular the setting of St Mary's Church, a Grade 2* Listed building, by virtue of:*
 - *The change in appearance to the Church resulting from its change of use - i.e. mezzanine floors traversing the double height windows, roof and cooker vents, domestic curtains, blinds or shutters, signage, boiler flues, external lighting and reopening of the south façade doorway as a **window** rather than a door, which appears incongruous and misplaced.*
 - *A change in character to the Church's setting by virtue of the intrusion of semi permanent residents parking, domestic waste bins, washing lines, garden sheds etc*
 - *The fact that the Church has minimal surrounds and is overlooked from the Village Hall car park, Wroslyn Road and Pigeon House Lane i.e. from 3 sides at close quarters, raising major issues of privacy for new residents, the safety of any children and the intrusion of domestic clutter into the social/historic heart of the village.*

Conversely, the continued use of the Church for the benefit of villagers would complete a unified precinct in the heart of the village, bringing together the pub, St Mary's Church, the Village Hall, Newell Room, Sports Changing Rooms and the Church itself. The shared use of the Village Hall car park would also enable parking to be removed from the south facing elevation of the Church and the creation of a courtyard cafe garden, designed to complement the Church through the use of natural, weathered stone paving and appropriate planting.

OBJECTION 3

THE NEED FOR HOUSING IN FREELAND

The village of Freeland, although relatively small when compared to Eynsham or Long Hanborough, has a wide range of housing from starter homes such as the flats at Willoughby Fields, to detached properties on The Green, many of which have a regular turnover.

In addition, there are a number of recently completed major housing developments nearby, most notably the 41 dwellings still to be completed at Freeland Gate and approximately a further 244 in Long Hanborough, whilst a further 2000 houses are planned for the proposed Salt Cross Garden Village to the south adjoining Eynsham.

OBJECTION 4

TRAFFIC & ACCESS

The small car park within the Methodist Church curtilage was seldom used, presumably as a consequence of its size, configuration and access. With the point of access onto Wroslyn Road immediately adjoining its junction with Pigeon House Lane, the proposed residential access is potentially dangerous with new residents backing out into a busy junction near Freeland Nurseries, the pub and the village hall.

Conversely, the retention of the Methodist Church for Community purposes, with shared use of the village hall car park, would enable the existing point of vehicular access to be closed and the parking area transformed into a south facing community space allied to the proposed community café. (See Objection 2.)