

St Joseph's Parish Meeting – Sunday 22nd September 2024

OUR FUTURE

This meeting began with a presentation which was recorded and is available to watch (c. 45 minutes) on our website at

<https://stjosephschurchupminster.com/our-future/>

The slides for the presentation are available at the same address and paper copies are available on request.

Although it is not a substitute for watching the presentation, here is a very brief overview to provide some context for the discussion which followed and is summarised below. Based on the vision that was presented in last week's newsletter, I outlined what I felt we need to invest in as a parish community, in terms of people and physical space. In terms of people, the hope is that as a parish partnership (with Elm Park and the Hornchurch parishes) we will be able to employ a shared Youth Worker. This would involve a commitment in the region of £10k per year though some grants may help initially. In terms of physical space, St Peter's Hall on Front Lane and the Social Centre on St Mary's Lane are likely to cause increasing problems due to their age, and this is an opportunity for us to think what would best serve the life and mission of our parish in the future. It would be wonderful to have a purpose-built, long-lasting building with space for the pre-school, social club and larger gatherings over two storeys. The cost is likely to be around £2 million. St Peter's is little used by the parish, and the income from lettings does not cover the costs of maintaining it. It is proposed that we focus our resources on the central site, selling St Peter's and its 3 acres of land. A successful sale would give us some clarity on the level of fundraising we need and give us confidence to proceed with the design and planning application and applications to grant-making bodies. The presentation concluded with a timeline leading to a new social centre possibly being in use by 2029.



Scan QR code to
view the video
and slides on our
website

Discussion points: *(responses in italics)*

- Why is there some resistance to reinstating a parish council, which might have been consulted in developing these ideas?
 - *For the reasons set out in this week's newsletter article I think an open meeting gives more people a voice. These ideas have also been discussed extensively with the parish Finance Committee. At the start of the year Bishop Alan asked parishes which didn't currently have a Parish Council to form a 'Vision implementation Group' to take forward the Diocesan Vision of parishes working in partnership: I invited Esther McCall and Caroline Beasley to be part of this alongside our Stewards Bernadette Tsocos and Simon Darvill and have sought their input as well.*

- Would the new building be just for the parish or available for our partner parishes?
 - *It would be 'our' building, but if our partner parishes wanted to use it for something, or if we have a joint event, of course it would be offered wherever possible.*
- Will there be a project manager, rather than it all falling on the parish priest?
 - *Fr Matthew together with a small working group would have oversight but it is likely that someone would be identified to act as a professional project manager.*
- A Guide leader expressed concerns about what would happen to the various Guide groups and other users of St Peter's if sold? St Peter's was felt to be ideal in many ways (parking, green space) though it was acknowledged the building had problems.
 - *As far as possible groups would be accommodated in the new social centre, though it was acknowledged this might not meet the needs for every hall user and we would need to balance external groups with parish needs. Even with the number of hirers we have, St Peter's runs at a loss and would need considerable investment in ongoing maintenance just to keep it going as at present. If the building were to be condemned as unsafe, no one would be able to use it. But we are open to suggestions.*
- It was stated by more than one person that we need to future-proof the parish for future generations both spiritually and practically, and a new purpose-built building would help ensure this. Moreover we should make the most of a priest who will hopefully be here long enough to see it through.
- It was felt a new building would facilitate catechesis and formation of all ages and complement the recruitment of a youth worker – though the discussion had focused more on the building, this was also seen as a good idea.
- There was some discussion about the viability of retaining at least some of the St Peter's site
 - *This is certainly something we can explore, even on a short-term basis to ease the transition to a new social centre. Alternatively, it may be some of the site could be preserved for community use under different ownership, and a developer may even accept this as part of their planning application. Clearly the less land we sell or the more strings we attach, the less we get from a sale and the more ambitious our fundraising target.*
- Would St Joseph's School be able to use the new building?
 - *Yes, and conversations have already begun. There is interest in this, given constraints on the school site. Clearly, steps would be taken to ensure adequate safeguarding when different groups are using different spaces.*
- Who owns the church buildings and land?
 - *All property is owned by the Diocese under civil law, but under canon law parishes enjoy the benefit of the property that has been given to them*

including the value if sold. The diocese must still approve certain levels of expenditure and all property transactions.

- We should be cautious about disposing of assets, as this has happened in other places and once something has gone it is gone forever.
 - *Certainly, this decision is not taken lightly and we would only accept an offer that we considered appropriate in view of the bigger scheme.*
- There were concerns about parking and the impact on residents of an expanded social centre.
 - *Parking is certainly an issue locally, as those coming to Mass experience, but people evidently do find places to use. For some the convenience of public transport, and not having to drive to social events, is a positive.*
- The parish has run formation programmes in the past without the new facilities that are proposed. Could we invest in St Peter's and make that our main social and community space?
 - *It is hard to see us being able to afford two new buildings especially without proceeds of selling St Peter's. Perhaps the school could buy the land currently occupied by the social centre, but it's not clear the social club would work so well at St Peter's due to the distance from the church. Also, we no longer have the benefit of meeting rooms at the Convent where many formation activities took place in the past.*
- Could there be some grants available to support investment in both buildings?
 - *Most likely grant making bodies would only entertain a single application from an organisation, in which case we'd probably get the same amount to be shared between the two as we would for a single project. There may well be some more focused grant bodies whose criteria would only be satisfied by one of the projects. However grants would only go some way to meet our target in any case.*
- Could more use be made of the Church, rather than building a new facility, for example if we replace the pews with more flexible seating?
 - *The church is set apart for worship. We already use it for formation and large meetings such as this, but it is not ideal as difficult to heat for a such an event, and AV equipment has to be set up and packed away each time. It wouldn't be appropriate to use it for social events.*
- Has advice been sought from Havering Planning Department to determine if these plans would be allowed?
 - *Contact hasn't been made yet, as advice must be formally requested (and paid for). We are hoping to arrange an informal conversation about the whole project. However we have also had initial advice from a firm of architects recommended by the diocese on the basis of their recent work including within Havering. It is based on their advice that we anticipate that permission would likely be granted but take a long time.*

- Could we have something more in keeping with adjacent buildings than what is proposed?
 - *The sketch on the slides is not an architect's design, just something I quickly put together for the slides. A proper artist's impression will come much further down the line. However I'd hope to raise the aesthetic standard rather than lower it, with the old Convent more of an inspiration than Aldi.*
- Who gives final consent to this process?
 - *Ultimately the Bishop acting with the other trustees of the diocese. Normally a proposal would be presented to the Bishop by the Parish Priest having consulted with the parish (though in exceptional cases a 'top down' intervention could be required). It should be noted that at a parish level the Finance Committee assists and advises the parish priest. This meeting is itself an exercise in consulting the parish as widely as possible. The proposals presented by Fr Matthew have not been developed in isolation but draw on many conversations with different groups. Discussions have also been held with the Diocesan property committee and with the Bishop to ascertain the diocese's position. The Bishop is in principle supportive of the proposals.*

The meeting concluded at about 5.40pm.

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My responses to each point (*in italics*) are not intended to be the final word on the matter nor a clinching argument, but just that: a response.

If you were unable to attend the meeting but would like to contribute your thoughts (preferably having watched the presentation and read through the above) please do get in touch with me. Over the next couple of months there will be continuing conversations between representatives of the diocesan property committee and a working group initially comprising members of the finance committee and our Stewards of the Gospel. The purpose of these conversations will be to explore some of the suggestions and concerns raised by parishioners and identify the next steps to be taken. Updates will be given in the newsletter when we have something to share. If we go ahead with the project then this working group will no doubt evolve to draw on particular areas of expertise within our parish community (fundraising, planning, design, project management etc). Many thanks to all who contributed to Sunday's discussion and to Bernadette Tsocos for taking notes of the meeting which were invaluable in preparing this summary (though any errors or omissions are mine).

Let us trust in God, and seek his will and his glory in all that we do.

Fr Matthew