

Parish Meeting 26th January 2025

A short meeting was held in between the Sunday morning Masses to continue the conversation about a proposal introduced at the last parish meeting in September 2024, regarding the future of the Social Centre and St Peter's Catholic Centre in Cranham. The notes from that meeting, available on our website, should be read for context.

Fr Matthew set out the reasoning behind this proposal, namely a lack of suitable meeting space at our central site. At present the Confirmation group use Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School, as the Social Centre proved inadequate. First Communion Parents' meetings are held in Church, which is not an ideal space for such meetings and recently was unavailable at short notice. In addition the Social Centre is likely to develop costly problems as it has well exceeded the design life for its style of construction. The hope is that we will be able to replace the present building with a new brick-built two storey building, housing a large hall, kitchen and meeting room in addition to the club and pre-school spaces. This is a major undertaking for the parish: initial consultation with architects has led to a figure of £2 million. Our neighbours at St Edward's Romford have recently completed a project of similar scale, funded by a combination of land sale, grants and fundraising within the parish. It is not unfeasible for us to contemplate something similar.

The other aspect of the proposal concerns St Peter's Catholic Centre in Cranham. As a Mass Centre this played a significant part in the life of our parish community, but nowadays less so. In fact only one parish group uses it regularly: St Joseph's 5th Upminster Guides. It is hired by other groups including some other local Guide groups, and for private parties, but the income barely meets the basic outgoings. The building, a larger 'twin' of the Social Centre, is in a significantly worse state. The building sits on just over 2.5 acres of land. Given the state of this building, its location and our lack of use of it, it seems that its greatest benefit to the parish of today and the future would be in terms of its sale value, which would make a significant contribution to the new building project.

A number of concerns were raised at the last meeting. Parking in Upminster is a perennial issue, but offset by a central location which not everyone has to drive to. Disposal of land is not something to be done lightly, as once gone we would be unlikely ever to get it back. But that doesn't mean it shouldn't be done. The diocese does not want parishes to be holding on to land or buildings that isn't used or useful to our core mission.

Fr Matthew explained the decision making process. Authority to make decisions for the good of a parish is delegated by the Bishop to the Parish Priest, though major expenditure and decisions regarding property require the approval of the Bishop and trustees of the diocese. In discharging his stewardship of the material goods of the parish, the Parish Priest is advised by the Parish Finance Committee. A Parish Council is another forum for consultation, but at the present time Fr Matthew is of the view that regular open meetings provide greater opportunity for engagement.

In terms of progress since the last meeting, Fr Matthew has met with some of the users of St Peter's, and he and members of the parish finance committee have met with a trustee of the diocese who is also a chartered surveyor. We have been advised that the size and location of the site means it would only be of interest to developers if we sold the entire site as a single parcel of land. To satisfy charity commission requirements, it would need to be sold in an open sale process to achieve the best possible value.

Following these meetings, Fr Matthew submitted a formal proposal to the diocesan property committee. The diocese has agreed to undertake the necessary legal preliminaries to putting the site on the market – the timescale for this is as yet unknown. However no final decision has been taken at this stage.

Questions from the floor:

Would it not be better to keep St Peter's as a youth facility for the parish partnership?

We would need to spend a lot of money on St Peter's in order to keep it, and we would still need to do something about the Social Centre. This is an opportunity to develop a new facility for the parish in a more central location, which would be available for youth work and other activities for the parish and partnership.

Have we considered letting the field out to e.g. a football club?

Yes – in fact this has been done, though we had a lot of difficulty with one particular group and the modest potential income doesn't really justify holding on to the land.

How would we accommodate all the different activities that have been mentioned given the number of evenings available?

The new Social Centre would have capacity for more than one activity or meeting at a time. The club/bar area and preschool room would be available for use in addition to the main hall and meeting room that are planned on the first floor. Parish groups, such as Confirmation, Youth Group and St Joseph's 5th Upminster Guides, would logically be prioritised over some of the external groups which currently make use of St Peter's (we have taken on these groups because we aren't using it ourselves). We would still look to take on recurring or one-off bookings for times when we are not using the hall.

Can't we make more use of St Peter's, and ensure it is available for groups such as Confirmation?

Have we looked into the cost of improvements to St Peter's?

The reality is that this building is in a poor condition and would need a considerable sum to be spent on things such as a new roof and improving the toilets and kitchen. It would still be poorly insulated, and lack the longevity that would justify this expenditure. In terms of location, St Peter's is only convenient for those who live nearby. It's location made some sense as a Mass centre, but it is impractical for activities linked to a celebration in the church. On the other hand, selling St Peter's would help us to the goal of replacing the Social Centre entirely. We are looking to build something for the future rather than keeping two buildings going that don't meet our needs.

Are we confident in getting planning permission for the new building? What about tensions with local residents over these plans?

The architects we have consulted (following advice from the diocese) have worked in Havering, and are confident that the sort of thing we are considering should not meet any problems though it is a lengthy process. No doubt there will be some opposition, but there is also a need for housing which is anticipated as the most likely purpose the land at St Peter's would be put to.

It should be noted that a number of people who didn't speak indicated support for the plans immediately after the meeting and subsequently via email.