

St Wistan's Church Building Update - October 2021

Thank you for your continued interest in the future of St Wistan's Church building. We very much appreciate the time and thought that people have put into engaging on this topic. We understand how much the building is seen as a treasured part of the town's heritage and identity.

The initial consultation period was completed in September and the Diocese of Leicester's Archdeaconry Mission Committee, the Bishop's Council and the Bishop of Leicester have all now supported the local Parochial Church Council (PCC)'s request to propose formal closure of the church building.

The Church Commissioners (a national institution which rules on whether a Church of England church can end its status as a place of worship) **has now been sent the proposal for formal closure of the St Wistan's church building.**

What happens next?

The Church Commissioners (which is separate from parishes and dioceses) will put the proposal in to a legal document known as a **Draft Scheme** in the coming months. The Draft Scheme is sent to interested parties, notices displayed at the church, and a notice published in local papers and on the Church of England website. The Commissioners say that it will take at least 35 days to produce and publish the Draft Scheme but we are aware there is a backlog of cases so it may take longer. **Once published, there will be a 28-day period when anyone may write to the Church Commissioners either in support of the scheme or to object to it. The Church Commissioners will consider all the representations made before making their final decision.**

How long does the process take?

The legal process requires that the steps are carried out in a particular order. The time it takes to formally close a church depends on the rate at which the draft scheme progresses through the stages. This speed of the process is influenced by the level of objections to the draft Scheme. If there are a lot of objections to closure then the process will take longer because submissions made by interested parties and the public must be responded to by the Bishop. The Church Commissioners will then compile those responses and send them to the people who made them, giving them in turn, a chance to respond to the responses - so the more objections are submitted, the longer the process.

Reminder of the wider circumstances relating to the building's future:

The Future

Sadly, the timing of the closure is not within the control of either the PCC or diocese, however we are hopeful that a final decision will be made in 2022.

If the church building is formally closed as a place of worship by the Church Commissioners, every effort will be made to secure an alternative appropriate future use. Occasionally, a potential use can be found quickly, but often it takes time to identify and agree an appropriate use and there is a legal process which must be followed which ensures public consultation is built-in.

The Condition of the Building

The PCC has established an **ongoing regime of weekly monitoring of the building** in conjunction with the architect.

Following the Information Event earlier this year, the PCC had a further inspection carried out by architect Mark Stewart RIBA, SCA, AABC. Mark is a highly experienced conservation accredited

architect, who holds the highest level of conservation accreditation from the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) as well as being on the register of Architect's Accredited in Building Conservation (AABC).

The resulting inspection of the church building at the end of July has confirmed that the steeple is sound. It also looked to what, if any, temporary measures could be put in place to provide protection over the winter and concluded that these would (a) be of *'limited value'*, (b) could have a detrimental impact on the rest of the building and (c) that *'what is required is the undertaking of the repairs and propping of the structure as one project'*.

The expert advice concludes that although some further masonry fall may occur, there is little change to the underlying issues. It also said works could be undertaken much as per the previous specification and costs, which the PCC had already obtained. So the most urgent priority continues to be progressing the process required for the official 'closure as a place of worship' status to be granted from the Church Commissioners; thereafter progress can be made exploring options for alternative uses (and gaining permission with appropriate public consultation), which will allow for repair and preservation of the building that is so cherished as part of the town's heritage.

Enthusiasm for Fundraising

- The PCC was encouraged by the enthusiasm from some members of the community to help fundraise and hoped soon to be in a position to welcome donations to assist with any short-term protective works that would help see the building through the winter. Given the recent inspection report, however, nothing short of the full repair works would be appropriate and so it is not appropriate for the PCC to receive donations for temporary protective works. It will be challenging to fundraise to cover the cost of the repairs, particularly if grants are being sought, as the main grant funders for this type of works will require clarity on the use of the building before awarding a grant. Therefore, it is likely that the repairs may not be undertaken until a future use is agreed and the PCC are no longer responsible for the care of the building.
- It is possible that a Friends Group could be set up by members of the community to fundraise towards the full cost of the repairs, on the understanding that the funds raised would have to be given to those responsible for the care of the building at that time in order for the repairs to be undertaken. However, it would not, of course, be appropriate to fundraise for a new use for the building before permission was granted for any such use.
- In the meantime, initial informal conversations about possible future uses will continue on the understanding that the final decision of the closure of the church has not yet been taken so as not to prejudice the outcome of the legal processes. It is not appropriate to share these initial conversations publicly; more work will need to be done to test whether the ideas can be developed in to robust plans to secure a viable future use for the historic building. However, be reassured that once an appropriate potential future use has been identified, the public will get an opportunity to comment on the proposal to the Church Commissioners before The Church Commissioners decide to grant permission for the new use.

**The PCC hopes to issue a further update as soon as there is news to share in the new year.
If you have queries, please email WigstonRector@yahoo.com**