

UPDATE REPORT

BY THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES
READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE: 6th March 2019

ITEM NO. 11

Ward: Norcot

App No.: 181555/FUL

Address: Grovelands Baptist Church, 553 Oxford Road, Reading

Proposal: Demolition of existing chapel and church hall. Redevelopment of the site to provide a three storey mixed use development comprising of community halls and ancillary accommodation at ground floor level, 2 x one bedroom flats, 6 x two bedroom flats and 2 x three bedroom flats at the upper floor levels, all with associated external amenity space, car parking and cycle storage.

Applicant: The Trustees of the Gate

Date application valid: 1st September 2018

Major Application 13 week target: 1st December 2018

Extended deadline: 20th March 2019

Planning Guarantee 26 week target: 2nd March 2019

RECOMMENDATION

As on main report.

1.0 ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Site Visit and Amended Plans

1.1 At the accompanied councillors' site visit, which took place on 28th February 2019, a number of questions/ issues were asked/raised as follows:

- *What part/s of the cupola would be reused, and more details of how this would be incorporated into the scheme?*
Planning Officer response: This is indicated on the updated drawings provided to Councillors prior to Committee and included in Appendix 3 of this update.
- *Would all stained glass within the building be reused?*
Planning Officer response: All stained glass which is in good condition will be reused. This is indicated on the updated drawings.
- *How would stonework details around windows and other decorative stonework features be used?*
Planning Officer response: This is indicated on the updated drawings.
- *It was noted that the date stone has been painted over.*
Planning Officer response: The applicant has confirmed that the paint would be carefully removed by a stone repair specialist. The location of stone in the proposed scheme is shown on the updated drawing
- Concern over the effect of proposed balconies on the overall appearance of the proposed design was discussed.
Planning Officer response: The balconies are included as a means to provide some private amenity space, however, if these were removed from the scheme, because of concerns regarding design, then this would be acceptable,

as their removal, would not in itself be a sufficient ground to refuse the scheme.

1.2 The amended plans (in Appendix 3) show how and where the features to be retained, would be used in the proposed scheme, and in summary are as follows:

1. A terracotta string course between the contrasting brickwork of the ground floor and upper floors from the existing terracotta string course of the church building
2. Re-use some of the existing terracotta cill details for the windows on the tower.
3. Re-use some of the terracotta projecting window header/coping/corbel details as parapet coping to the tower, a string course above the first floor tower windows and to some of the larger windows.
4. Re-use of the existing west gable Venetian window motif arch detail on the proposed new west facing gable.
5. Re-use of terracotta flat dressings around the first floor tower windows to more closely reflect the existing chapel tower design.
6. Date stone to be carefully extracted, the paint removed and the stone relaid, to the front of the proposed building as shown on the plans in Appendix 3.
7. Existing lead covered timber cupola to be refurbished and mounted on flat roof to new tower.
8. Stained glass windows - several are damaged but refurbishment is proposed. Internal glazed screen to be formed from the refurbished stained glass windows and set into new timber frames as shown on the amended internal plan, included in Appendix 3.

Such detailing would be subject to planning control as part of the materials condition.

Applicant's response to comments by the Reading Civic Society, Ancient Monuments Society and others with regard to the Local Listing

1.3 In a supplemental letter, the applicant has set out the following points: *“Great emphasis has been placed by some parties on the ‘unchanged’ nature of the chapel’s exterior. However, a photograph on page 16 of the submitted Heritage Impact Assessment demonstrates that the exterior of the chapel has in fact changed quite significantly. The photograph shows that the building used to feature a large spire / wind-catcher on the eastern side of the main ridge. On examination of the current roof, this change is evidenced by the presence of replacement ridge and pitched roof tiles. The current roof design is therefore not unchanged or original and the loss of the historical spire is a significant change to the appearance of the building now, compared to its previous form. It appears that no reference has been made to this significant roof alteration by other parties. Yet, having consulted two independent heritage experts, it is considered that this change could be considered a material consideration in assessing the significance of the chapel in its present form.*

On noting the external alterations to the chapel’s exterior, namely loss of a former prominent spire and resultant adaption of the original roof form, Heritage Planning Services have updated the Heritage Impact Assessment...”

Additional Letters of Support & Objection

1.4 Since the main committee report was prepared for this committee a further 8 no. emails of support for the application proposal have been received, 1 no. petition in support, signed by 113 no. people, and 2 no. objections (one from a previous objector. All of these have been sent direct to both the Planning Case Officer and

all Planning Applications Committee Members. The emails of support have been received from the following community organisations: Acorn Nursery; Gate Church's Youth Work; CIRDIC and Reading's Women's Centre; Mustard Tree (They undertake a number of projects for marginalised communities and individuals in the area); Love Your Community; Frantic Fridays Children's Group; TLG (Transforming Lives for Good) Reading; and Messy Church at Empress Road.

- 1.5 They all state that the proposed redevelopment at Grovelands Chapel would offer modern flexible community space in place of the old chapel building, which is currently unsuitable for use by the above organisations. The Church has made it clear that it would seek to engage with those initiatives and would provide them with the opportunity to make use of the new community spaces to offer a valuable public service to the local community in this part of Reading.
- 1.6 These community groups express deep concern that those opposed to the development appear to be placing greater emphasis and importance on aesthetic value of an old building compared to the significant public and social benefit that would be realised should the planning application be granted.
- 1.7 The specific comments by each organisation are set out in Appendix 1 below.
- 1.8 The objectors reiterate points previously made with respect to design, loss of a locally listed non-designated heritage asset, and the provision of affordable housing, all of which have been responded to in previous committee reports and updates (as appended to the main report). The full objections are included in Appendix 2.

Response from the Applicant to comments made by Alistair de Joux (4/3/19) and Reading Civic Society

- 1.9 The applicant has submitted a direct response to comments as follows:

1) Alleged 'Designated Heritage Asset':

'The Church building is now locally listed, making it a designated heritage asset'.

This is incorrect. A Designated Heritage Asset is defined by the government as 'A World Heritage Site, Scheduled Monument, Listed Building, Protected Wreck Site, Registered Park and Garden, Registered Battlefield or Conservation Area designated under the relevant legislation.'

Grovelands Chapel is not a designated heritage asset and Local Listing affords it no protection under statute.

Planning Officer note: It is correct that local listing is a non-designated heritage asset, and although a material consideration does not provide any formal protection under statute.

2) Alleged unchanged nature of chapel's exterior:

Reading Civic Society and others have placed emphasis on the unchanged nature of the exterior of the chapel.

Parties have neglected to note that the exterior has been subject to significant changes, most notably the loss of a former prominent spire, with resultant roof modifications. This has been highlighted in the recently updated Heritage Impact Assessment (see para. 4.8, p22) and these matters have an impact on the assessment of the building's significance, in heritage terms.

Planning Officer note: Changes to the exterior are evident.

3) Specific and Extensive Retention of existing chapel features:

Alistair de Joux states: 'The heritage statement sets out broad aspirations for the reuse of certain features, but apart from the cupola these are no more than aspirations, and no firm proposals for the location of the items identified for retention is included in the proposal.'

This is incorrect. The latest proposed plan and elevation drawings clearly set out specific, realistic and tangible proposed reuse of certain features. Following careful analysis of the existing fabric and survey information, innovative re-use of the existing features is proposed [refer to para 1.4 above], resulting in a building that will be unique in design, contextually appropriate and will pay homage to the original chapel.

Planning Officer note: The amended plans are available to view, which do clearly show how features would be incorporated into the proposed scheme (as in Appendix 3), but these were not at the time of the objector's email.

4) Alleged lack of affordable housing viability:

Alistair de Joux stated on 4/3/19 that 'the offer of affordable housing ...cannot be relied upon, because the profit levels shown in the viability assessment are simply insufficient for a private developer to support'

This is incorrect and highly speculative. There are specialist developers that partner with churches/charities that are willing to operate off less than normal profit margins and use atypical financial models. The church has already identified potential partners, including those willing to provide the affordable housing offered. The affordable housing will be a condition of the planning approval and can be delivered.

Planning Officer note: The provision of affordable housing would be a requirement if planning permission were granted.

5) Alleged lack of responsibility (by the church) to the wider community:

Reading Civic Society, in referring to the Church in their letter of 6 February 2019, state 'It is disappointing that it (the church) does not take its responsibility to the wider community for the retention of this Heritage building seriously.'

This is incorrect. Options to fully or partially retain the chapel have been duly considered and demonstrated to be unviable. A viable and sustainable solution for the site is needed and is proposed.

Reading Civic Society neglects to note that a Church's responsibility to its community extends far beyond that of its buildings. The church is concerned with such matters as **Education, Poverty, Health, Crime, Sustainability, Hunger, Homelessness, Substance Abuse and Social Integration of the marginalised**, to name but a few. The church takes its responsibility to the community very seriously, has a proven track record, and all of the above issues will be best addressed by the church, in partnership with service providers, in a purpose-built modern community space.

Heritage is about more than just buildings. The heritage of the site is in part derived from the church's mission aims, established in the late 19th century. The

proposed development enables the church to continue its heritage of mission to the local and wider community.

Planning Officer note: The applicant has responded positively to all requests for amendments and additional information.

6) Alleged lack of justification for loss of a non-designated heritage asset:

Reading's Heritage Policy has not been updated in line with the NPPF. Core Strategy CS33 does not contain a 'balancing exercise' with which to weigh other public benefits against heritage conservation.

In forming a 'balanced judgement' (NPPF para. 197) consideration should be given to the significant public benefits offered by the scheme, through housing and community space, benefits which cannot be realised if the chapel is to be retained.

Planning Officer note: This is set out in the original reports from 6th December 2018 PAC and as appended to the main report.

- 1.10 The Applicant has set out some detail with respect to a recent appeal at 25 Alexandra Road, Epsom, Surrey. This is where a locally listed building was proposed to be demolished to make way for a block of ten flats. The inspector found that the scheme would be acceptable with regard to the effect on the historic environment. The inspector took into account that without Statutory listing or a Conservation Area the building could be demolished. Also taken into account were previous approvals for schemes for the site including its demolition which retained parts of it (stained glass panels) within the replacement building with the Inspector stating, 'Given the potential for the demolition of the unprotected building, the previous history and the ability to safeguard the elements of the building that are of significance I am satisfied that the proposal resulting in the demolition of the building would be acceptable.'

The applicant's view is that that case has several similarities to this planning application and highlights that demolition of Grovelands church was previously accepted by the PAC subject to securing a suitably designed building. Officers have assessed the proposed scheme and consider it to be acceptable and have therefore recommended approval as set out in the main report and appendices. The proposed scheme also includes the reuse of some elements of the existing building.

Additional/Amended Documents

1.11

- Heritage Impact Assessment, Version 3, prepared by HPS, received 1st March 2019
- Ground Floor Plan as Proposed - Drawing no: RCC.17/150 H received 5th March 2019
- Proposed Elevations North and West - Drawing no: RCC.17/160E, received 4th March 2019

Case Officer: Alison Amoah

APPENDIX 1: COMMENTS FROM ORGANISATIONS IN SUPPORT

Acorns Nursery - Over the past 4 years we have served the Reading community by providing a sessional, term time, preschool in Calcot. We support families in preparing their children for school. We currently have 41 children on role, including 7 funded 2 year olds and 2 dual language children. We develop excellent relationships with our families, which often continue after their children have transitioned into school. Parents travel from as far as Caversham, Coley and Tilehurst to access our nursery. The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation by providing the funds to develop our current site in Calcot and the support of a board of directors who oversee our finances. We perceive a need for a sessional nursery on the Oxford Road that would offer places for the families who are eligible for funded education for their two year olds.

Gate church's Youth work - Over the past 15 years we have served the Reading community by providing high quality youth clubs in Calcot, Tilehurst and on the Oxford Road. The two youth clubs we currently lead (in Calcot and Tilehurst) each see between fifteen and thirty Christian and non-Christian young people attend each week. The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our youthwork by providing many volunteers, funding the youth clubs, resources, food, and providing building space and facilities to enable the youth clubs and young people to thrive.

CIRDIC and Reading's Women's Centre - Over the past 27 years CIRDIC and CIRWC has served the Reading community by providing support and comfort also food and activities at CIRWC. At CIRDIC we provide food, baths, showers, clothes and nurses to the homeless and disadvantaged. We feed between thirty and fifty people three times a week. The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation by supporting me as the manager of these two charities.

Mustard Tree - Over the past 13 years we have served the Reading community by providing invaluable services to number of Group Including Elderly Befriending Project - visiting the elderly folk who are Lonely; Youth Motor Project - giving young people vital training and knowledge; and the Rehab Project - helping the sex workers of the area to be supported and befriended out of their situation. The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation. It was the Gate church that first set up the charity and funded its growth.

Love Your Community - Over the past 4 years we have served the Reading community by working in partnership with The Gate in the day to day operation of the TLG Education Centre. The centre works with young people aged 11 to 16 who have been or are at risk of being excluded from education. We have specifically worked in partnership round supporting employment preparation with interview skill sessions and the like. We also partnered with the Gate to put Acorns Nursery School into the Empress Road site in Calcot. The nursery school has capacity for 42 pupils throughout the day and is currently nearly at capacity. We would love to be able to consider this provision in the Oxford Road area.

In the past couple of years we also supported in the development of a Community Conversation in Calcot in partnership with West Berkshire Council, the Police, Sovereign Housing Association and others. Engaging with families in the community and others we are currently considering the development of a community cafe in Calcot to provide a safe place in the community. We have also supported in the development of a 'Messy Church' project which now has just under 30 families with pre-school aged children who are served by the project.

The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation by supporting our development through a sharing of their expertise and resources including support with

start-up costs, firstly as a company limited by guarantee and then as a charity. The Gate has provided further expertise in the provision of Directors/trustees who have wide ranging experiences across both the corporate and charity sectors.

Frantic Friday's Children's Group - Over the past 20 years, this children's work has served the Reading community by providing sessions for primary school aged children. At Frantic Friday we provide a space for around 20- 30 primary school children to join in games/ sports, food, stories, drama and art/ craft activities that allow children to express and talk about their thoughts and feeling about the world around them. This allows for children, and their families, to grow in their faith and emotional literacy, bring this back in to the heart of the community. We have 6 adult helpers that attend regularly. Alongside this, we also provide a volunteer service for young people (13- 17 years) to give back to their community by helping at Frantic Friday. Around 5 young people currently volunteer, some of them having done this as a part of their Duke of Edinburgh award. The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation by providing funding, training and premises (currently at Empress Road Calcot). This work used to be available at Grovelands Chapel until the building posed a health and safety hazard for such activities.

TLG (Transforming Lives for Good) Reading to express our strong support for the above planning application and the significant public benefit that it will offer.

Over the past 9 years we have served the Reading community by providing Alternative Provision for students focusing on the needs of those who are struggling in school. It is part of a growing national network of schools. At TLG we address the individual social, emotional and learning needs of young people aged between 11 - 16years, developing self-esteem, engaging young people on pathways to learning with accredited outcomes and enabling them to gain recognised qualifications. We challenge and help modify bad behaviour, teaching young people to make appropriate choices and facilitate reintegration back into school or on to further education or employment. We currently take referrals from 3 local authorities including Reading and from local schools. We currently have a waiting list and are looking to expand our centre as the need increases to engage with young people at crisis point in their education.

TLG Reading, an OFSTED registered independent school, is run as a partnership between The Gate and TLG The Education Charity. We are a non-profit making organisation; The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation. We have a number of volunteers that come in from The Gate community that offer mentoring, family support and support within the Classroom and Office. The Gate have supported our family run events and hosted award evenings to celebrate student success as well as supporting charity events that students have put on.

The current space [at Grovelands] would not pass Independent School Standards. One of the initiatives that is run by TLG is Make Lunch which you are probably aware is now in Reading dealing with the problem of holiday hunger and we would look at working in partnership with the existing Make Lunch team to open a Make Lunch in the Oxford Road area.

Messy Church at Empress Road - Over the past 2 years we have served the Reading community by providing a safe place for parents, carers and little ones to come and meet, to play and share life together. We have many families join us for this event on a weekly basis. The Gate Church has been influential in the work of our organisation by providing us with a building free of charge and use of all facilities, plus providing full support for myself in this role. Though my role was funded by West Berkshire Council, the church provided me with an office and support whilst I launched the Messy Church and established it in the community and paid for expenses that I incurred, and supported me whilst I built the team

and also supported me in running a parent cafe and an after school kids club at the same time. I now work for Messy Church voluntarily but the church continues to give me a budget and pay for all expenses. The After School Club now has different volunteers running it but it also serves the local community and again would be an excellent club to also run from the Grovelands Chapel site in the future should this planning application be approved.

APPENDIX 2: OBJECTIONS

- 1) As you know, this application returns to PAC this week, following the deferral for a members site visit. I am again writing to highlight points which I continue to believe need to be considered very carefully in making the decision on this application.

The application will be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless there are any other material considerations that you consider outweigh the adopted plan. The emerging plan Reading Local Plan updates and strengthens the older Core Strategy policies, and in particular these policies strengthen the degree of protection to Reading's precious heritage. The Church building is now locally listed, making it a designated heritage asset.

Emerging Policy EN1 advises that all development proposals are expected to protect heritage assets and their settings, historic character and the local distinctiveness of the area in which they are located. Any harm or loss of a heritage asset requires clear and convincing justification, usually in the form of public benefits, and the loss of locally listed assets may be approved only where the benefits of the development significantly outweigh the asset's significance.

While the applicants has worked with council officers and overcome some of the shortcomings of the previously refused application, the Heritage Assessment unfortunately continues to fall short of English Heritage guidelines and expectations in regards to providing mitigation for the building's loss and to assessing its contribution to the historic character of the area. The heritage statement sets out broad aspirations for the reuse of certain features, but apart from the cupola these are no more than aspirations, and no firm proposals for the location of the items identified for retention is included in the proposal. Yet even if firm proposals were in place, their retention does not provide sufficient mitigation for the loss of the building, and the conclusion that its loss is justified is almost entirely unfounded within the assessment. Reliance on the findings of this heritage statement to approve the application would not result in a sound decision.

Architectural quality also does not also justify the loss of this heritage asset. While it has some interesting features, the proposed design is at best of mixed quality, and it is certainly not of the outstanding quality needed to justify the loss of the existing building, nor will it make a strong architectural contribution to this area. Its proportions would not fit well with the scale of this largely Victorian street scene, and it would be top heavy in comparison with the two-storey scale of surrounding buildings particularly on Wilson and Wantage Roads. The desire to maximise space at second floor level by using a crown roof and a full floor plate at this level detracts from the design, and in addition the box balconies are an alien feature in the streetscenes of Oxford and Wilson Roads (the closest similar balcony on Oxford Road is well to the west, opposite B & M, and even there tucked away from the street frontage). These balconies will in themselves result in considerable harm to the Victorian streetscene in this part of Oxford Road, even aside from the loss of the building.

Community benefit would be in the form of a space of similar size to the existing one. However, the offer of affordable housing while now clearer in the officer's recommendation than in the December report cannot be relied upon, because the profit levels shown in the viability assessment are simply insufficient for a private developer to support. If this application is approved, we can expect to see a follow-on application to carry out the development without affordable housing, if the site is sold on with planning permission or even if it is developed by the Church itself. While the viability statement was not submitted for the purposes of reviewing the ability of the

development to provide affordable housing, it demonstrates also that profit levels are well below benchmark levels and therefore that a challenge to providing the affordable housing element would have a very high chance of succeeding. This could be by way of a section 73 application to vary the terms of the section 106 agreement, supported by an additional viability assessment tailored specifically towards demonstrating that the development would be unviable if the affordable housing component is provided. For this reason, the provision of affordable housing does not provide a robust reason for allowing the loss of this heritage asset.

Overall, there is no sound basis for the approving the loss of this important locally listed heritage asset.

I urge you to take into account the points I have made in this email, and hope that your decision on Wednesday evening does not result in the permanent and irreversible loss of this important and attractive building.

- 2) I believe a decision is imminent on the plans for Grovelands Baptist Church, and I'd like to ask you all to vote against the exceedingly ugly planned development. I do realise that housing is needed but I think it's also extremely important to preserve the characterful buildings which give Reading its identity. Also, if we are to have new buildings (which I would welcome, in the right locations) then at least can we have something forward-thinking, ecologically intelligent, and stylish? The proposed building is none of those things - just a very basic, characterless construction which will detract from the feel of the area.

Sticking the bell tower back on the corner - in an inelegant and meaningless way - is really not enough.

I love the Oxford Road area and I chose to move here, from London. I accept that the houses (on the north side) are pretty small, being Victorian workers' terraces - but that's the nature of this Victorian environment. I'd rather live in a small house here than a large one on a modern estate.

Please don't strip away the identity of this area.

APPENDIX 3: UPDATED DRAWINGS - TO SHOW HOW AND WHERE EXISTING FEATURES WOULD BE INCORPORATED



to be reused



Existing Grovelands Chapel lead covered timber cupola to be refurbished and mounted on flat roof to new tower.



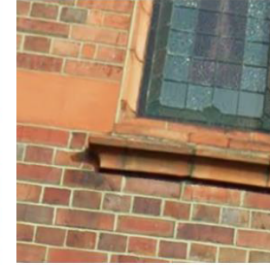
Existing terracotta string course to be reused



Existing projecting terracotta corbel string course reused



terracotta dressings from arched head of existing western gable Venetian window motif to be reused.



Existing terracotta projecting cills to be reused.



Rev	Date	Description	By
A	20/07	Phases added as per request	DA
B	21/07	Updates following LA comments	DA
C	04/08	Parking Bay Amended for Transport Accessibility	DA
D	27/08	Revised planning design	DA
E	28/08	Issue to LA for information	DA
F	28/08	Updates to LA REC Transport Comments	DA
G	01/09	Updates to LA REC Transport Comments	DA
H	02/09	Screened glass glazed screen locations added	DA

* CHAPEL STAINED GLASS TO BE REFINISHED IN GLAZED SCREENS



COURTESY: CHURCH PROJECTS LIMITED



Chartered Architects, Property Consultants and Designers
 Use A3 (Owner Business park, Oldens Road, Fordingal, Sevenoaks, Kent TN20 5GH)
 Tel: 01222 489102 Email: admin@charterarchitects.co.uk Web: www.charterarchitects.co.uk

Project name
COMMUNITY & RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT
553 OXFORD ROAD
READING

Drawing title
GROUND FLOOR PLAN
AS PROPOSED

date	scale	
JUNE 2017	1:100	
drawn	checked	
DA	PW	
project number	drawing number	revision
RCC.17	/150	H

