

APPLICATION NO.	P15/S0941/FUL
APPLICATION TYPE	FULL APPLICATION
REGISTERED	27.3.2015
PARISH	WATLINGTON
WARD MEMBER	Anna Badcock
APPLICANT	Trustees of the Church Houses
SITE	Land adjacent to St Leonard's Church, Prospect Place, Watlington, Oxon
PROPOSAL	Demolition of St Leonard's Church Hall, relocation of the existing car park and erection of two dwellings (one four bedroom rectory and one five bedroom market unit), and double garages, construction of access (car park and dwellings repositioned and formation of undeveloped buffer zone as shown on amended plans received 25th August 2015 and diverted footpath route shown on amended block plan received 2nd February 2016).
AMENDMENTS	As above
OFFICER	Paul Lucas

1.0 **INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This application is reported to the Planning Committee as a result of a conflict between officers' recommendation and the views of Watlington Parish Council. Members will recall that this application was considered by the Planning Committee on 9 March 2016, where it was resolved to defer the application for a site visit. At the site visit on 28 March 2016, Members requested that more detailed financial information was provided in support of the application. This has been received and circulated directly to Members.
- 1.2 The application site, as identified on the plan attached at **Appendix 1**, is a parcel of land approximately 0.29 hectares in area, located within the built up confines of the village of Watlington within the Watlington Conservation Area. The land comprises a single storey pitched roofed building previously in use as a church hall in the southern corner of the site, a tarmacked hardstanding used for car parking in the centre of the site and the remainder of the site is grassed. St Leonard's Church, a Grade II* listed building lies about 60 metres to the north-west of the site and its graveyard forms the north-western site boundary. There are three other listed tomb structures within the grounds. The south-western site boundary is with Prospect Place, which also forms the route of Watlington Footpath 27. The south-eastern site boundary is with a chalk stream beyond which lies a wooded triangular parcel of land. The north-eastern boundary would be with another undeveloped and partially wooded rectangular parcel of land.
- 1.3 Vehicular access onto the site exists from Prospect Place from the north-western corner of the site. There is a bungalow, Pound Close located on a large plot on the south-western side of Prospect Place. There is a residential development of two storey dwellings to the south, with the closest dwelling at a distance of 23 metres from the site boundary. There are mature trees along three of the site boundaries with a hedge along the boundary with Prospect Place. The south-eastern portion of the site lies within Flood Zones 2 and 3. Although the public can access the land, it is not designated as public open space.

- 1.4 A claim for a Definitive Map Modification Order (DMMO) has been submitted to Oxfordshire County Council (reference 03271) for the addition of a footpath running diagonally from the western to the eastern corners of the site and continuing across land in separate ownership to the east of the site. This claim is pending consideration by OCC Countryside Access. A plan of the claimed route is shown at **Appendix 2**. There is also an informal pedestrian route through the site along the northern side of the boundary hedge with Prospect Place.

2.0 PROPOSAL

- 2.1 The application seeks full planning permission for the demolition of the church hall and the erection of two detached dwellings and detached double garages and the realignment of the church car park, as detailed on the amended plans and other documents submitted in support of the application. The dwellings would be located to the north-east of the church hall, orientated so that the front elevations would face north-west towards the church. The detached garages would be located close to the south-western elevations of the dwellings. The car parking area would be relocated to the south-western end of the site. A four-metre wide ecological buffer zone would be provided from the south-eastern boundary with the stream, denoted by a post and rail fence on the plans. The application also allows provision for a footpath through the site, as a diversion to the route claimed through the DMMO procedure. This would be subject to a separate application under Section 257/9 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. The application also shows the continuation of the informal access route through the proposed car parking area onto Prospect Close in the southern corner of the site. The rationale behind the application is to dispose of the disused church hall building and to provide a 4-bedroom dwelling for occupation by the rector. The proposal would also enable the capital sum (net of costs) from the sale of the 5-bedroom market dwelling (and any subsequent sale of the rectory) to be added to the permanent endowment of the Maria Cook Trust. This means that the funds could only be used for the upkeep, refurbishment and improvements to St Leonard's Church. Specifically, the St Leonard's Renewal Project includes works previously granted planning permission under reference P11/E2510/FUL for an extension to the church to provide a new kitchen and toilets including a disabled toilet and baby changing facilities and other proposed improvements to the South Porch and interior of the church.
- 2.2 A copy of the current plans is provided at **Appendix 3** whilst other documentation associated with the application can be viewed on the Council's website: www.southoxon.gov.uk.

3.0 SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS & REPRESENTATIONS

- 3.1 **Watlington Parish Council** – Objection to original application sustained following receipt of financial information, summarised as follows:
- Scale of dwelling too large for the site.
 - Design disappointing so close to the proximity of the most important building in Watlington.
 - Losing an area of important open space.
 - The parking seems insufficient for the needs of St Leonards Church especially for weddings and funerals.

Environment Agency – Original objection overcome by amended plans, no objection subject to prevention of flooding conditions

County Archaeological Services (OCC) - No objection

Historic England (South East) – “The proposed development site is some way from the church and would not directly impact on key views. Furthermore, the church hall does not have any architectural merit there can be no in principle objection to its demolition in terms of the impact on the character of this part of the conservation area. While the new development could have an impact on the character of the conservation area we were content that it would not entail major harm to the area as a whole..... The additional information demonstrates that there is a secure mechanism for ensuring that any money raised by the proposed development benefits the upkeep of the church.....As no detailed breakdown of costs is provided it is impossible to say whether the cost of the proposed works are reasonable or whether the projections for money raised are realistic. I do not think that this information is necessary as there is no policy objection to the proposals; instead a view is being sought on whether the public benefits outweigh the harm, in which case the demands of paragraph 134 of the NPPF have been met. Therefore this is not a formal enabling development application and there is no need to be proved that the money raised is enough and no more to deliver the outcome..... Further information is needed on the impact of the proposed works to the church itself and the nature of the Maria Cook Trust before the requirements of paragraph 120 of the NPPF are met and the Council is in a position to weigh harm against public benefit as required by paragraph 134 of the Framework.”
Following confirmation that The Maria Cook Trust governing document states that the funds may be used for “the extraordinary repairs, improvement or enlargement of the fabric of the church” and that planning permission has been granted for the extension to the church, Historic England have confirmed that this answers the queries above.

Countryside Access (OCC) – Original objection to conflict with claimed route overcome by proposed diverted footpath

Contaminated Land Officer (SODC) - No objection

Drainage Engineer (SODC - MONSON) – Original objection overcome by submission of FRA to satisfaction of the Environment Agency

Forestry Officer (SODC) - No objection, subject to tree protection and landscaping conditions

Countryside Officer (SODC) – Original concerns addressed by amended plans, no objection subject to habitat management plan condition

Conservation Officer (SODC) - No objection to amended application and supporting financial information, subject to materials condition

Highways Liaison Officer (OCC) - No objection subject to highways-related conditions

Watlington Environment Group Watercourses Project – Objection to original plans overcome through provision of buffer zone on amended plans, subject to condition to secure appropriate management

Neighbours –

Original proposal: 25 representations of objection, 3 of comment and 25 of support
Amended proposal: 9 representations of objection, 1 of comment and 15 of support
Following receipt of financial information: 4 representations of objection and 5 of support. The representations are summarised as follows:

Objections:

- Loss of the only remaining informal public open space in this part of Watlington in conflict with objectives of Watlington Conservation Area Character Appraisal
- Overdevelopment – dwellings dominate the centre of the plot and amendments have increased the size of the developed area from 0.26 to 0.297 hectares and post and rail fence divides site into two, further reducing its openness
- Size of dwellings and introduction of domestic environment would fail to preserve the open character of this part of the Watlington Conservation Area.
- Adverse impact on setting of St Leonard's Church, obscuring key views, particularly from the Lych Gate on Pound Close and car parking spoiling views from the south on Prospect Place
- Modern design inappropriate and not in accordance with the SODG 2008, reduction in ridge heights insufficient, double garages and materials not in keeping
- Car parking more prominent than retained open space
- Lack of justification of need for improvements to St Leonard's Church to outweigh harm to heritage assets and no ability to secure the use of proceeds of sale of the dwellings for those purposes
- Impact on ecology of chalk stream of national and international importance from contaminated run-off or during the build phase
- Ecological impact of subdividing churchyard from green corridor of wooded area adjacent to stream
- Inadequate public parking provision for church events and loss of overspill area, resulting in on-street parking and conditions prejudicial to highway and pedestrian safety
- Loss of church hall resulting in increasing pressure for storage space in church and loss of facility for groups to use
- Obstruction to two paths across the site, one subject to a DMMO claim
- Concerns about upkeep and access to remaining area of open space
- Concerns about management of ecological buffer zone
- Concerns about details of implementation of diverted public footpath
- Conflict with proposals in the draft Watlington Neighbourhood Plan, particularly requirement for open space to serve 79 new homes
- Archaeological survey insufficient
- Lack of affordable housing
- Would set a precedent for development of other open spaces in the village, particularly the woodland to the east of the site
- Should be scaled back to a single modest dwelling on the church hall footprint
- No access improvement plan
- Mismanagement of resources by the diocese
- Financial information indicates that funds needed for church maintenance and improvements could be secured through other means

Supporters:

- Removal of ugly, dilapidated and dangerous building
- Provision of rectory close to church
- The church needs repairs and up to date toilet and kitchen facilities to enhance its community use
- Sensitive well proportioned development in accordance with SODG 2008, better than existing homes in St Leonard's Close
- This is a private site with no authorised public access

- Some open space will be retained between the churchyard and the houses
- Other open space in Church ownership retained to north of site
- Dwellings moved out of flood zones
- Permanent buffer zone for the stream incorporated
- No negative impact on wildlife
- Outside of root protection areas of important trees
- Dwellings would generate less traffic than church hall
- Car parking ample, better organised and overflow would be available
- Provision of diverted footpath and retention of informal path
- Roof ridges have been reduced
- Dwellings set back from Prospect Place so would have less impact in views of St Leonard's Church
- Loss of church hall has not caused any problems for local groups due to alternative venues
- Minimum size of development necessary to provide sufficient funds for investment in St Leonard's Church

3.2 The representations can be viewed in full on the Council's website:
www.southoxon.gov.uk.

4.0 **RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY**

4.1 [P14/S2742/FUL](#) – Demolition of St Leonard's Church Hall and reinstatement of the site of the hall to grass, construction of two dwellings (one four bedroom rectory and one five bedroom market unit), together with double garages, access, landscaping and boundary treatment works

- Withdrawn following officers concerns with the impact of the proposal on protected trees, obstruction of important views and overly suburban design (27/01/2015)

[P11/E2510](#) – Approved (12/06/2012) – material commencement due to installation of drainage

Extension to the Grade II* church of St Leonard's Watlington to provide new facilities for church users, including a small kitchen, disabled WC & baby changing unit.

[P71/M0468](#) - Approved (20/07/1971)

ERECTION OF HALL FOR GENERAL USE.

5.0 **POLICY & GUIDANCE**

5.1 South Oxfordshire Core Strategy policies

CS1 - Presumption in favour of sustainable development

CSB1 - Conservation and improvement of biodiversity

CSEN1 - Landscape protection

CSEN3 - Historic environment

CSI1 - Infrastructure provision

CSM1 - Transport

CSQ2 - Sustainable design and construction

CSQ3 - Design

CSR1 - Housing in villages

CSR3 - Community facilities and rural transport

CSS1 - The Overall Strategy

5.2 South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2011 policies;

C4 - Landscape setting of settlements

C6 - Maintain & enhance biodiversity

- C9 - Loss of landscape features
- CF1 - Protection of recreational or essential community facilities
- CON5 - Setting of listed building
- CON7 - Proposals in a conservation area
- D1 - Principles of good design
- D2 - Safe and secure parking for vehicles and cycles
- D3 - Outdoor amenity area
- D4 - Reasonable level of privacy for occupiers
- D10 - Waste Management
- EP1 - Adverse affect on people and environment
- EP4 - Impact on water resources
- EP6 - Sustainable drainage
- EP8 - Contaminated land
- G2 - Protect district from adverse development
- H4 - Housing sites in towns and larger villages outside Green Belt
- R8 - Protection of existing public right of way
- T1 - Safe, convenient and adequate highway network for all users
- T2 - Unloading, turning and parking for all highway users

5.3 Watlington Neighbourhood Plan – Consultation Stage 2 completed, draft being prepared and expected to be produced September 2016.

5.4 Supplementary Planning Guidance:
Watlington Conservation Area Character Appraisal 2011
South Oxfordshire Design Guide 2008 – Sections 3 & 5

5.5 National Planning Policy Framework
National Planning Policy Framework Planning Practice Guidance
The policies within the SOCS and the SOLP 2011 of relevance to this application are considered to be in general conformity with the provisions of the NPPF and therefore this application can be determined against these relevant policies.

6.0 **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

6.1 The planning issues that are relevant to this application are whether the development would:

- be in accordance with the Council’s strategy for housing development in rural areas;
- cause the loss of an essential community facility;
- result in the loss of an open space or view of public, environmental or ecological value;
- preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Watlington Conservation area and maintain the setting of the Grade II listed St Leonard’s Church;
- safeguard the living conditions of neighbouring residential occupiers and would provide adequate living conditions for future occupiers of the development;
- demonstrate safe and convenient access and adequate off-street parking provision for the development; and
- give rise to any other material planning considerations

6.2 Principle of Residential Development

The SOCS housing Policy relevant to this proposal is CSR1, which outlines the approach for assessing proposals for infill residential development in the District. The SOCS classifies Watlington as a “Larger” village. Policy CSR1 explains that residential development on infill sites of no size limit is acceptable in principle in “Larger” villages. The supporting text for Policy CSR1 states: “Infill development is defined as the filling of a small gap in an otherwise built up frontage, or on other sites within settlements where the site is closely surrounded by buildings.” Whilst the site does not belong to a built up frontage, Pound Close lies about 25 metres to the west of the site boundary, 15 Prospect Close is sited around 25 metres to the south, 5 The Meadows is positioned approximately 22 metres to the south-east, 1 Church Meadow about 50 metres to the east, 14 St Leonard’s Close around 50 metres to the north and St Leonard’s Church about 60 metres to the east. Although Policy CSR1 does not define “closely surrounded” it is officers’ judgement that in this context the site is closely surrounded by buildings and in compliance with the Council’s strategy for housing in rural areas. Consequently, the proposal falls to be assessed against the impact-based criteria of Policy H4 of the SOLP 2011 for new dwellings, which are addressed below.

6.3 Loss of Essential Community Facility

The SOCS Policy CSR3 and the SOLP 2011 Policy CF1 both seek to resist development that would result in the loss of essential community facilities. Policy CSR3 is based on a survey of village facilities that did not include community halls or places of worship. In contrast, Policy CF1 states that essential community facilities may include community halls and places of worship. Policy CF1 explains that if suitable alternative provision already exists, a facility will not be considered essential. The applicant has provided evidence to show that the use of the church hall was in decline before it was declared unsafe for continued use in August 2013.

6.4 The evidence also sets out that the net income was insufficient to cover the costs of bringing the building back to a suitable standard. Information has also been provided to demonstrate that the applicant has been conducting consultation about the future of the church hall since 2005 and that no alternative solutions could be agreed with the Watlington Church Hall Concern group. In March 2013, a survey of other hall space was carried out by the applicant, which identified 12 alternative venues with space available, 7 of which were within Watlington and the other 5 in the surrounding villages. On the basis of this information, officers accept that suitable alternative provision exists for the activities that were held in the church hall (all of which it is understood were able to relocate upon closure) and consequently the proposed development would not result in the loss of an essential community facility and would therefore not contravene the above policies.

6.5 Loss of Open Space

Criterion (i) of Policy H4 of the SOLP 2011 requires that an important open space of public, environmental or ecological value is not lost, nor an important public view spoilt. The site is identified in the Watlington Conservation Area Character Appraisal as an important open space, with other areas of important open space immediately adjacent to the south-west, north-west and north-east and an area of important trees to the east. It states “The large areas of open space around St. Leonard’s church and the adjoining woodland are particularly important...”. However, this identification does not, in itself, preclude development from taking place, provided such development has an acceptable impact on the value of the open space.

6.6 a. Public Value

It is understood that the site has been used as informal open space by local residents for many years. Nonetheless, the land is in private ownership and is not formally identified as public open space and has not been designated as an Asset of Community Value. However, a DMMO claim for a public footpath running across the site from the site access onto Prospect Place at the western edge to the eastern edge adjacent to the stream (and continuing through the woodland to the east) has been lodged with Oxfordshire County Council. If successful, this claim would lead to this route being adopted as a public right of way through the site as a modification to the Definitive Map, but this process is likely to take around 10 years to complete. Oxfordshire County Council Countryside Access had raised a holding objection to the application, because the 5-bedroom dwelling would be built on the claimed route. In order to address this objection, the application was amended to identify an alternative public footpath route to the north of the claimed route avoiding the footprint of the proposed dwellings that would still connect to the remainder of the claimed route off-site. In the event of planning permission being granted, the applicant would have to apply for a section 257/9 diversion under the Town & Country Planning Act 1990, administered by the Council's legal services. The diverted route will need to be certified by OCC Countryside Access so to have successfully diverted the public rights from the claimed route before any development could commence. At that point, the diverted route would be added to the Definitive Map and the claimed route would be extinguished on this site (although the claim would continue to apply to the land to the east of the site).

6.7 b. Environmental Value

In the opinion of the Council's Conservation Officer, the only significant external views of the site are on the approach to the church from the west along Prospect Place and glimpses from the graveyard through trees. Thus, there are few significant views into and out of the site. These views are already compromised somewhat by the position and appearance of the church hall and the extensive hardstanding. Although it is acknowledged that the proposed dwellings would significantly increase the amount of built form on the site, the closest dwelling would be positioned about 26 metres back from the boundary with Prospect Place, whereas the church hall is at a distance of 10.3 metres at its closest point. This would mean that the dwellings would be located further back from the site entrance and as a result become partially screened by the established tree cover around the south-west and south-eastern boundaries of the graveyard as the viewer progresses towards the church. A sizeable proportion of the trees along these boundaries are evergreen and would provide year-round screening. The dwellings would also be seen only against the mature tree cover on the land to the east of the site, which would provide a wooded backdrop. In this respect, officers consider that these views would not be unduly diminished.

6.8 In relation to views of the church from the south along Prospect Place, these views are in a north-westerly direction in which presently the church hall is partially visible, however the dwellings would be sited sufficiently to the north-east of this view and so would not appear unduly intrusive. Whilst the proposed car parking would be in the foreground of this view, it would be screened behind the existing and retained boundary hedge with Prospect Place to a greater extent than the church hall and so would not detract from these views. The car park surfacing could be constructed from more sympathetic materials than the existing tarmac car park, secured through the external materials pre-commencement condition. There would also be scope for new planting at the southern edge of the car park to soften its appearance where there is a gap in the hedge.

The dwellings would be clearly visible from the diverted footpath route through the site.

- 6.9 However, when facing towards the church and graveyard from this footpath, the dwellings would be behind the observer and would not detract from these most important views. It is acknowledged that the dwellings would be more visible in the winter months when the trees are out of leaf, however, at those times, the dwellings to the east on The Meadows and Prospect Place also become more noticeable and would provide a residential context for the proposed dwellings.
- 6.10 c. Ecological Value
The chalk stream forming the south-eastern site boundary is identified as having national and international ecological importance. As a consequence, the site has an ecological value. The application has been amended to take account of the ecological value of the stream by providing a 4 metre wide undeveloped ecological buffer strip from the site boundary with the stream. This buffer strip would be separated from the remainder of the site by a post and rail fence. The ownership and responsibility for the buffer strip would be divided between the owners of the proposed dwellings, where located to the south-east of their respective gardens and the Trustees of the Church Houses, where located to the south-east of the proposed car park. The Council's Countryside Officer is satisfied that the buffer strip would provide an appropriate protective area so that the ecological value of the stream could be maintained. The Environment Agency has raised no objection to this buffer strip in their most recent consultation response. This would be on the basis that a detailed Habitat Management Plan would be submitted to and agreed with the Countryside Officer prior to the commencement of development. Subsequently, as planning permission runs with the land, all of the future landowners would be bound by the requirements of this plan. It should be noted that at present, the landowner is under no obligation to carry out any measures to maintain the ecological value of the stream. In relation to other ecological issues, a planning condition to ensure that external lighting would be ecologically appropriate and an informative to advise that demolition would not take place during bird nesting season could also be imposed.
- 6.11 In the light of the above assessment, whilst the proposed development would involve building on open space, it would not significantly detract from the public, environmental or ecological value of contiguous areas of open space and undeveloped land in this part of Watlington and would accord with Criterion (i) of Policy H4.
- 6.12 Historic Environment
The SOCS Policy CSEN3 seeks to preserve or enhance the District's designated heritage assets, including conservation areas and listed buildings. The SOLP 2011 Policy CON5 sets out the Council's statutory duty to protect the setting of listed buildings. The SOLP 2011 Policy CON7 sets out the Council's statutory duty to ensure that development would preserve or enhance conservation areas. The SOCS Policy CSEN1 aims to protect the District's distinct landscape character and key features. The SOLP 2011 Policy C9 explains that any development that would cause the loss of landscape features will not be permitted where those features make an important contribution to the local scene, and/or provide all or part of an important wildlife habitat and/or have important historical value. Criteria (ii) and (iii) of Policy H4 of the SOLP 2011 explain that the design, height, scale and materials of the proposed development should be in keeping with its surroundings and the character of the area should not be adversely affected. This policy is supported by detailed guidance in Section 5 of the SODG 2008.
- 6.13 As discussed above, it is recognised that the existing site is an important open space within the Watlington Conservation Area. The Council's Conservation Officer considers

that the location of the existing building at the front of the site detracts from this character and its removal presents an opportunity to offset the visual impact of the proposed dwellings on the character and appearance of the conservation area. It is also acknowledged by the Council's Forestry Officer that the important trees in and around the site boundaries would not be harmed by the proposed development, subject to a detailed tree protection condition. Whilst the established foliage would provide extensive screening, this cannot not be relied upon to wholly mitigate the visual impact of the development. The design of the dwellings, whilst large, have been improved in comparison with the withdrawn planning application. They are more appropriate in design and quality and there is some variety and breaking up of key massing/bulk of the buildings which results in a positive design scheme. The scale of the dwellings have been reduced through a lowering of the ridge heights so that they are more typical of vernacular properties.

- 6.14 Although objectors have pointed out that the amended plans have increased the red line site area, the amount of space taken up by buildings and hardstandings (therefore excluding the undeveloped ecological buffer zone and any soft landscaped areas) on the amended plans is less than the original plans - a reduction from about 2070 square metres to 1940 square metres. Good detailing has also been included. In the Conservation Officer's opinion, the materials specified would seem to be appropriate to the character of the area and in-line with the SOLP 2011 Policy CON7 and Section 5 of the SODG 2008, subject to agreement of samples and joinery details through pre-commencement planning conditions. The proposed location of the garages has also been amended so that they would be set back from the site frontage in accordance with Section 3 of the SODG 2008. The car park would be realigned into a more discreet location and could be constructed of more sensitive materials and benefit from soft landscaping around the edges, secured through a pre-commencement landscaping condition.
- 6.15 The treatment of the remaining undeveloped land to the north of the site within the applicant's control (edged blue on the block plan) intended to be used as informal overflow parking, could also be controlled through a landscape management condition to ensure that a maintenance schedule and a long term management plan is agreed with the Council for the soft landscaping works. As such, the impact of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the conservation area would be minimised.
- 6.16 The site forms part of the setting of the Grade II* listed church. Taking account of the prominent location of the church hall at the front of the site, Historic England and the Council's Conservation Officer considers that there would be appropriate spacing between the church yard and the new dwellings to ensure that the impact upon the setting of this heritage asset and the associated listed tomb structures would be minimised. The Conservation Officer also advises that the repositioning of the hardstanding required for the parking area would be more discreetly located within the site behind the established hedgerow. The position of the undeveloped land within the blue line to the north of the application site would increase the physical separation between the built form and the green setting to the church and improve the views through the site entrance and from the churchyard.
- 6.17 The current application represents the maximum amount of development which could be sensitively accommodated whilst retaining the existing features of this site. Notwithstanding, the proposal would result in an increase in built form, which Historic

England and the Conservation Officer considers would result in less than substantial harm to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. Having regard to Paragraph 134 of the NPPF, officers have considered whether the public benefits of removing the church hall and securing funds specifically for the improvement and upkeep of St Leonard's Church, would provide sufficient justification to outweigh the identified less than substantial harm to the significance of this heritage asset.

- 6.18 The church is regarded as an essential community facility, available to all as a place of worship and for holding other community events. The applicant has explained that the proposed investment in St Leonard's Church has two quite different but linked aims: to stem and reverse the decline in church membership and to address the church's financial difficulties. The applicant considers that both of these factors will be crucial in ensuring the church has a viable future and can remain open to serve the Watlington community, through increasing the flexibility and secular uses of the church building, at the same time as strengthening and augmenting its main purposes of worship. The applicant has explained that the church has been running a deficit budget for several years, and it is only with considerable difficulty that it has been able to pay its bills in recent times. The applicant considers that it is unrealistic to expect the high running costs to be met solely through church membership and that it must generate more income through holding more activities, leading to more supporters and to achieve this the church must be transformed into a comfortable, multi-purpose building. The applicant believes that the experiences of other churches has shown this to be a successful strategy. It is acknowledged that there are many alternative venues now available in Watlington for family parties, social clubs or exercise classes, but in the applicant's view the church will nevertheless be able to offer something of additional value to the community, and that it will provide a suitable base for existing and new church-related activities, as well as a special setting for larger community events such as prestigious concerts. However, the applicant considers that it is also important to acknowledge the role that this beautiful and historic building has played in the life of the town. Investing in it and updating it for the 21st century will help it to sustain that role for many years to come.
- 6.19 Some of the works that form part of the Renewal Project were granted planning permission under P11/E2510 in the form of an extension to the church. It is clear that those works would improve facilities within the church and this was advocated by many people who had written to the Council in support of that proposal at that time. It is clear from the support received in relation to the current application that these improvements continue to be advocated by a proportion of the local population. The facilities would clearly contribute towards the upkeep of the church in its primary function as a place of worship.
- 6.20 Although the facilities would not be a pre-requisite for the church to be used by the community on a wider basis than just as a place of worship, evidently the facilities would improve the functionality of the church in relation to its aspiration to become more of a community hub as Watlington's population continues to grow. Financial information has been submitted by the applicant and reviewed by Historic England. Historic England's conclusion is that the public benefits of securing funds for specific proposals for the improvement and upkeep of St Leonard's Church, would provide sufficient justification to outweigh the identified less than substantial harm to the significance of the conservation area. The proposed development would only be acceptable on the basis that these funds are secured for this purpose through the completion of a Section 106 agreement between the applicant and the Council.
- 6.21 Officers are aware that the site was one of many submitted to the Council for consideration for development (Site 303). As such, it was included in a Landscape

Capacity Assessment for Sites on the Edge of the Larger Villages, where the conclusion was that there was potential for harm to the setting of the church and the loss of a central open space. However, the submitted site included the land within the blue edge and did not evaluate a specific application. Instead, the assessment is one piece of the shared evidence base that feeds into the Local Plan 2031 and the emerging Watlington Neighbourhood Plan. Consequently, the conclusions of that assessment carry only limited weight when balanced against the evaluation of this detailed proposal on the significance of heritage assets by the Council's Conservation Officer.

6.22 Residential Amenity Impact

Criterion (iv) of Policy H4 of the SOLP 2011 requires that there are no overriding amenity objections. Policy D4 requires that all new dwellings should be designed and laid out so as to secure a reasonable degree of privacy for the occupiers. The distances between the proposed dwellings and the car park and the closest residential occupiers is such that there would be no discernible loss of light, outlook or privacy. The outdoor amenity space for the proposed dwellings (excluding the ecological buffer zone) would be well in excess of the 100 square metre recommended minimum standard set out in Section 3 of the SODG 2008 for dwellings of this size to accord with the above policies.

6.23 Access and Parking

Criterion (iv) of Policy H4 of the SOLP 2011 also requires that there are no overriding highway objections. The proposed vehicular access arrangements to the site would remain the same as existing. There are concerns from local residents that the new formal parking area and overflow space would not be of sufficient size to accommodate church events, leading to increase in on-street parking and consequential conditions prejudicial to highway and pedestrian safety. The Highway Liaison Officer considers that the proposal would be unlikely to result in any significant intensification of transport activity. The proposal would be unlikely to have a significant adverse impact on the highway network. It is his opinion that the vehicle movements associated with the proposal in terms of the previous/existing usage of the site would not present "severe harm" as required in Paragraph 32 of the NPPF to warrant a recommendation for refusal.

6.24 In addition to standard parking and garaging conditions, a construction traffic management plan pre-commencement condition is considered necessary to ensure that disruption would be minimised during the construction phase and that activities would not intrude upon the root protection areas or ecological buffer zone. On this basis, the proposed development would comply with this element of the above criterion.

6.25 Other Material Planning Considerations

Matters relating to flood prevention have been addressed to the satisfaction of the Environment Agency, subject to the imposition of conditions. OCC Archaeology are satisfied that the exploratory digs were sufficient for the amended location of the dwellings, given that these have moved further away from the location of known finds. As the proposal would be for a net gain of two dwellings, there would be no requirement to provide affordable housing under the SOCS Policy CSH3. Concerns about this development setting a precedent for similar proposals on adjoining areas of open space are understood, however, it is an established planning principle that each application must be assessed on the basis of its individual merits.

6.26 A planning condition removing permitted development rights for extensions, outbuildings, hardstandings and means of enclosure is considered necessary in order that the Council can exercise control over any future householder development that might otherwise cause visual, ecological or arboricultural harm. The proposed dwellings

are CIL liable, unless the applicant is able to demonstrate that the charitable exemption applies. The CIL charge applied to new residential development in this case is £150 per square metre of additional floorspace (Zone 1). 15% of the CIL payment would go directly to Watlington Parish Council (in the absence of an adopted Neighbourhood Plan) for spending towards local projects.

7.0 CONCLUSION

7.1 Whilst the proposed development is found to result in less than substantial harm to the character and appearance of the Watlington Conservation Area, it is considered that, subject to the completion of a legal agreement, the public benefits of removing the church hall and securing funds specifically for the improvement and upkeep of St Leonard's Church, would provide sufficient justification to outweigh the identified harm to this heritage asset. The proposal would also be acceptable in principle, would not result in the loss of an essential community facility, would not detract from the public, environmental or ecological value of contiguous areas of open space, would preserve the setting of the Grade II* listed building and safeguard important landscape features, would not detract from the residential amenity of adjoining occupiers, and would not give rise to conditions prejudicial to highway safety or increase flood risk. As such, the application proposal would comply with the relevant Development Plan Policies, Supplementary Planning Guidance and Government Guidance.

8.0 RECOMMENDATION

8.1 **To delegate authority to the Head of Planning to grant planning permission subject to:**

1. **The completion of a legal agreement to secure that any funds, derived from the disposal of the land the subject of planning application reference P15/S0941/FUL, are added to the permanent endowment of the Maria Cook Trust to be used only for the purposes of the upkeep, refurbishment and improvements to St Leonard's Church, Watlington; and**
2. **The following conditions:**
 1. **Commencement of development within three years.**
 2. **Development to be carried out in accordance with the approved plans.**
 3. **Church hall to be demolished prior to commencement of works.**
 4. **Levels to be submitted and agreed prior to commencement of development.**
 5. **Samples of all external materials to be submitted and agreed prior to commencement of development.**
 6. **Joinery details to be submitted and agreed prior to commencement of development.**
 7. **Withdrawal of permitted development rights for extensions/ outbuildings/ hardstandings/ means of enclosure.**
 8. **Parking and manoeuvring areas retained as approved.**
 9. **Construction traffic management plan to be submitted and agreed prior to commencement of development.**
 10. **No garage conversion into accommodation.**
 11. **Soft landscaping scheme including details of planting of trees and hedgerows and hard landscaping including driveway and parking surfacing and boundary treatments to be submitted and agreed prior to commencement of development.**
 12. **A landscaping maintenance schedule and a long term management plan for the undeveloped blue edge land shown on the approved block plan to be submitted and agreed prior to commencement of development.**

13. Tree protection details to be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of development.
14. Habitat management plan to be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of development.
15. External lighting details to be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of development.
16. Surface water drainage works to be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of development.
17. Foul drainage works to be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of development.
18. Flood risk mitigation in accordance with flood risk assessment.
19. No raising of ground levels within the site.

Informatives:

1. Nesting birds.
2. Public footpath diversion.

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