

12 June 2019

Dear Laurie and PCC Members

St Leonards Chesham Bois Parish Centre Redevelopment Project

Thank you for showing me the latest version of your Parish Centre Redevelopment Project. I was delighted to see the progress you've made because I know there have been various suggestions to redevelop over the past 30 years, and the existing buildings are more than showing their age. It's really wise to have grasped this nettle now.

I know what a sensitive site this is, and the way that the woods function as a green lung for people in top Amersham as well as Chesham Bois itself. I was interested to hear of the careful work you've done with Habitat for Humanity to protect the natural and human context of the new buildings.

Laurie has kept me in the loop about the process from initial ideas, first public consultations and then the recent meetings with local residents including the second one. I think it is wise to have engaged with, and encouraged, the local residents to contribute to the dialogue around the development. I am glad that this church development has a clear objective throughout, not just to clear up a site that was in danger, quite honestly, of becoming an eyesore, but to bless the wider community.

I think it is very wise and neighbourly to have conducted the whole process with a high degree of transparency. I had some thoughts about potential objections, given the sensitivity of the site, and was very encouraged to be taken through the real ones, to see that you have listened to a number of concerns and incorporated them into the most recent designs — reducing the capacity from 350 to 225 on the ground floor and containing the overall increase in the building's footprint.

The Rectory is very much a creature of the 1980s. Relocating and redesigning reduces its relative isolation on the site. I am sure you will follow the current Parsonage Board and Green Book guidelines. Moving the Rectory to the northeast of the site will also make its location more evident to visitors. As a collateral benefit, this also means residents on the North side of the site will be immediate neighbours of a largely residential building. The public and community centre will thus be contained within the heart of the site, allowing it to be better nested into its environment further away from immediate neighbours.

I felt your plans show real care for the nature of the site in an area of outstanding natural beauty. I noticed the parallel between the main building's overall flowing and non-angular design and work done, for example, at Saville Garden, the main building especially has carefully taken into account the wooded nature of the surrounding common land. I am pleased that the plans retain many trees and that landscaping is integral to the overall impact. It is a parish hall on private land rather than a community centre, but well used by the community, and I think it is very good to have designed with the context of local common land and woods.

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I know that many in the community have been concerned about traffic issues, parking and visual impact. The size of the project relates to the size of the Church without being disproportionate and the parking planned appears to be suitable for the regular and one-off uses. Your architects, Paul Southouse Associates, have been aware of this aspect of the commission.

They have maintained an empathetic approach to the site and appear to have solved many of the parking issues that could arise by siting, plantings, and some use of grasscrete. With trees and high hedges around the perimeter of the site the visual impact will be minimal from both North Road and South Road. The view from the triangle again seems to be unaffected.

Some neighbours are understandably concerned about the volume of use of the site. I note that the PCC is not looking for commercial or intensive use, whilst allowing for modest community rentals that will enhance the buildings value to local people. I see you are concerned to restrict use to reasonable hours and uses and as long as this is done, it looks as though any reasonable concerns about use will be met.

I appreciate that there will inevitably be disruption as the site is developed but I am sure the PCC will ensure this is kept to a minimum and all will be finished to a high standard — the contrast between the current buildings which are showing their age, some would say on their last legs, is considerable.

Some have voiced concern about the effect on the Common, but I don't quite understand these as all this land is privately church owned, in one way or another, no common land will be affected. Glebe land is not common land but has a very particular purpose. Community events may have taken place on this land in the past, as they may in the future, but it is not in itself part of the Common. The Diocese, Glebe committee and local area leadership are aware of and commend this project.

Thank you for your labours to get the project to this stage, I am sure there is much more hard work to come! I commend you for your transparent and community-engaged process, your concerns for achieving the right design and build for this sensitive site and for ensuring that the whole church is supportive of this project.

Every planning application involves tweaks and hopefully minor improvements, but I am sure you will engage in these in a relevant, informed and kindly manner. This project looks to serve the church and community now and, in the future, and certainly very much better than to stagger on with the present inadequate and ageing structures.

I will continue to pray for you and look forward to hearing regular updates and watching your progress with great interest

Yours in Christ

The Rt Revd Dr Alan Wilson

Alan Buckingham