

**REPORT TO:** Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board  
**DATE:** 18 June 2008  
**REPORTING OFFICER:** Strategic Director Environment  
**SUBJECT:** St Marie's Church, Widnes  
**WARDS:** Riverside

## **1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform Members of the receipt of a petition from group of parishioners from St Marie's in Widnes (The Friends of St Marie's 1864) with regards to the closure of the Church and to update the Board on the Council's response.

## **2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That**

- (1) The Board note the report and support the aims and objectives of the petitioners; and**
- (2) the petitioners are informed of the Board's decision.**

## **3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

- 3.1 St Marie's Church closed in early January 2007 following a decision by the Archdiocese of Liverpool that it was not economic to remain open due to congregation size and maintenance costs. Since this date the building has been vacant and 'mothballed' by the Archdiocese of Liverpool. Worship continues for the Parish in the former school canteen building, now the 'Parish Hall' opposite the Church.
- 3.2 Over the past eighteen months the Council has corresponded with the Archdiocese to ensure that they, as owners of the listed building, keep the building in good order. The Archdiocese carried out work in December 2007 and January 2008 to secure the building including removal of roof tiles, boarding up of windows and securing all doors from inside the building.
- 3.3 In January 2008 members of the local community requested the support of the Council and met with Councillor McDermott to discuss the situation. This meeting was followed by a petition to the Council under the 'community call for action' with 613 names requesting support in securing the future of the building.
- 3.4 Councillor McDermott and David Parr met with Archbishop Kelly and representatives from the Archdiocese in February to discuss the current situation and propose a way forward. The Archdiocese was not prepared to consider re-opening the Church for worship and rejected proposals for a mixed use solution.

3.5 In February and March 2008, Councillor McDermott wrote to Archbishop Kelly to propose the following:

- To return worship to St Marie's Church
- St Marie's Church to be partitioned to provide a smaller area for worship for up to 100 worshippers
- The remaining area to be made available for community use
- The building to be managed by a community trust or community interest company in which the Church is involved
- The community activity should provide revenue to supplement and support revenue raised through the Parish

3.6 Halton Borough Council's Planning Department have served a Section 215 notice (TCPA 1990) to deal with the unsightly land to the rear and its secure enclosure.

3.7 The group of local residents, The Friends of St Marie's 1864, continues to meet but currently they do not feel there is sufficient need for a 'community centre' in the area and do not want to pursue setting up a community trust at this stage. They will, however, look to continue as a pressure group, asking the Archdiocese to re-open the Church for worship.

3.8 It is understood that the freehold owner is currently Morbaine Ltd., the Widnes-based property company which owns the adjacent Ashley Way Retail Park. The former school canteen and land is unregistered and we have been unable to confirm the ownership although the Archdiocese considers this to be in their ownership.

#### **4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The petition, signed by 613 people, highlights that the building is now lying empty with an uncertain future. The Friends of St Marie's 1864 ask for the Council's support in saving the building and securing its future for the parish, local residents and the wider community.

4.2 In response to this petition it is recommended that the Council informs the petitioners that the Council notes the report and supports them in their aims and objectives.

4.3 The current situation of mothballing a vacant Church is not sustainable and could ultimately lead to the physical loss of the building.

4.4 Alternative future uses for the site will need to be assessed with regards to planning, listing and building regulations.

#### **5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 One barrier to securing a viable use is the covenant placed on the lease of the land which states that the building can only be used as a place of

worship. Therefore to progress an alternative use would require negotiation with the freehold owner.

- 5.2 It has also become apparent that the community around St. Marie's feel disenfranchised from any process to bring the building back into use due to the (understandably) difficult position in which many of the active members of the church find themselves. As such any re-use should make provision for occasional church activities and be accessible to St. Gerard's School.

## **6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

### **6.1 Children and Young People in Halton**

None

### **6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton**

None

### **6.3 A Healthy Halton**

None

### **6.4 A Safer Halton**

The police and members of the local community have highlighted that nefarious activities including drug taking, are taking place at the rear of the property.

### **6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal**

Following the listing of the building, it would be detrimental to the urban renewal of the area if the building were allowed to fall into disrepair. For the ongoing regeneration of this part of Widnes it is important that the long-term future of the building is secured, with an appropriate alternative use that serves the community.

## **7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

- 7.1 The building falls into disrepair – the building is a Grade II listed building and as such is protected by planning law. The Council will exert these laws as necessary to ensure that the owner continues to keep the building in a good state of repair.
- 7.2 There is a cost to the Council in the upkeep of the building if planning enforcement fails. The Council will seek to build on the existing relationship with the Archdiocese and work in partnership to ensure compliance with the requirements for listed building status.
- 7.3 Alternative uses do not serve the needs of the community and the building is not well used. Any alternative use would have to be agreed following community consultation and involvement.

**8.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

8.1 There are no background documents under the meaning of this Act.