

PLANNING, HERITAGE IMPACT & DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

**PROPOSAL : CHANGE OF USE OF FORMER CHURCH TO
USE CLASS E(G)(iii) JOINERY WORKSHOP AND
SHOWROOM WITH ANCILLARY STORE, OFFICE
AND WELFARE FACILITIES**

**ADDRESS : ST JOHNS CHURCH, BELLE VUE ROAD,
LEEK, STAFFORDSHIRE, ST13 8EP**

APPLICANT : G F CABINET MAKERS

DATE : JANUARY 2024 JOB No.: 2023-2857

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INTRODUCTION

This statement is submitted in support of a full planning application for the change of use of a former church to a joinery workshop / showroom with ancillary store, office and welfare facilities at St Johns Church, Belle Vue, Leek. The application has been submitted by Sammons Architectural Ltd on behalf of G F Cabinet Makers and is accompanied by drawing numbers 2023-2857-01, 2023-2857-02 and 2023-2857-03, all of which should be read in conjunction with this statement.

This adaptive reuse of the building complies with the prevailing planning policies and provides a genuine opportunity to provide an economic reuse for the building which will provide vitality and viability to the town whilst preserving its architectural and historic significance.

SITE DESCRIPTION

St Johns Church is a detached building constructed from facing brickwork under a plain clay tile roof. It sits on a wedge shaped plot at the junction of Macclesfield Road with Belle Vue Road. The land falls away in a south to north direction with a gentler fall across the site from the south east to north west. The building, which was constructed in 1875, sits hard up against Belle Vue Road. A detached two storey outbuilding constructed from facing brick with a timber framed cladding above lies to the north west with a smaller outbuilding to the east. Two small areas of hardstanding are provided to the south with the area between the building and Macclesfield Road laid to grass. The site is fully enclosed with a high brick wall delineating the boundary with Macclesfield Road and the western boundary where it terminates at Belle Vue Road with the boundary from here along the southern boundary being formed in a mix of stone and decorative wrought iron railings. The site is bound to the east, south and west by a mix of residential units which vary in size, scale, form, design and materials. To the north, on the opposite side of Macclesfield Road, lies Brindley's Corn Mill and the Conservative Working Mens Club both of which are designated heritage buildings (Grade II).

For the purposes of the development plan the application site lies in the town's development boundary where there is a general presumption in favour of development. The application building is not listed nor is it located within a designated Conservation Area.

PROPOSAL

This is a full application which seeks consent for the change of use of the former Church into a E(g)iii use class to provide a joinery workshop and showroom with ancillary store, office and welfare facilities.

The applicant, George Frederick Cabinet Makers, are an independent and family run business which has been established since 2005. Specialising in bespoke kitchens and furniture they have a team of highly experienced craftsman, skilled in a mix of traditional and modern cabinet making skills, hand painting and finishing and currently operate from a site within the town.

The existing business currently employs 7 full time staff, all of which walk or cycle to work. Deliveries to the business are made daily from a timber merchant in the town and delivered in a Sprinter type van. The applicant also owns a long wheel base van which is used for transporting and fitting furniture as and when required. The existing business currently operates from 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday as well as Saturday mornings 8am till noon. The proposed development would allow the business to relocate from rented to owned premises thus providing the business

with greater certainty at a time of economic uncertainty. It is not anticipated that the proposed development would result in any intensification of the business or generate any further jobs at this stage. No external alterations are proposed and the only internal alteration is limited to the removal of the existing church organ. Existing machinery requires dust extraction however this will all be fitted internally within the building.

PLANNING POLICY

Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Act 2004 requires proposals to be determined in accordance with the Development Plan taking into consideration any material considerations relevant to the determination of the application.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was revised in December 2023 and sets out the Government's planning policy for delivering sustainable development and facilitating economic growth through the planning process. Planning applications must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The NPPF is a material consideration and as such carries particular weight where development is not addressed by planning policies in the existing Development Plan.

Whilst the recently revised NPPF does not change the statutory status of the Development Plan as the starting point for decision making it does provide guidance to LPA's and is a material consideration in determining planning applications. The NPPF confirms that at the heart of the guidance is a presumption in favour of sustainable development (para 11) and that for decision making this means approving development proposals that accord with the Development Plan without delay unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The NPPF also sets out requirements in respect of housing delivery and securing high quality design. The following are considered to be the most relevant chapters:-

- Section 2 - Achieving Sustainable Development
- Section 6 - Building a Strong and Competitive Economy
- Section 7 - Ensuring the Vitality of Town Centres
- Section 8 – Promoting Healthy and Safe Communities
- Section 9 - Promoting Sustainable Transport
- Section 11 – Making Effective use of Land
- Section 12 - Achieving Well Designed and Beautiful Places
- Section 16 – Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment

The Development Plan for the Staffordshire Moorlands comprises of the adopted Local Plan (September 2020) and the Saved Local plan Proposals Map / Settlement Boundaries (1998). The most relevant policies of the adopted Local Plan are considered to be SS1 (Development Principles); SS1a (Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development); SS5 (Towns) SS5a (Leek Sub Area Strategy), DC1 (Design Considerations); C1 (Creating Sustainable Communities), E3 (Existing Employment Areas and Premises, T1 (Development and Sustainable Transport) and T2 (Other Sustainable Transport Measures). For the sake of brevity these policies are not quoted in full but they are referred to where appropriate in the following section.

ASSESSMENT

Principle of Development

The application site is located within the development boundary of Leek. Policy SS2 seeks to focus future growth within the settlement boundary for Leek and to strengthen its role as a service centre.

Local Plan Policy C1 seeks to protect “community facilities” such as village halls, village shops and post offices, schools, colleges, nurseries, places of worship, health services, sports and physical activity facilities, convenience stores, libraries, public houses and cultural facilities such as theatres and arts centres as these are considered to play an important role in community life in the Staffordshire Moorlands. The preamble to the policy continues that the loss of such facilities can have a widespread negative impact on the community, particularly the old and the young who live in rural areas and may have limited access to alternative facilities.

The NPPF also promotes the retention and development of local services and community facilities in rural areas. In line with this Government guidance, the policy seeks to support the retention of community facilities. Where an alternative facility of the same type already exists or the lost facility is replaced in the same locality so that it is accessible to all members of the community, this could mitigate the loss. It is recognised that there are occasions where particular uses may become financially unviable. In such cases, a thorough marketing exercise must take place and all options for continued use as a community facility (such as a multi use scheme) must be thoroughly explored.

St John’s Church was constructed in 1875 and since that time it has served the community well. It closed in March 2018 due to an issue with the heating system following a building inspection which found it to be inadequate and dangerous. Investigations revealed that a larger industrial metre and larger feeder pipe from the gas main was required. Such upgrading work would attract a significant cost which was outside the budget of the church owners. The church therefore closed and the 15 strong congregation transferred to the neighbouring St Edwards Church. The application building has therefore been closed for nearly 6 years and the owners still do not have the funds to undertake the necessary improvement works. The passage of time has only exacerbated things with costs for materials and labour continuing to rise and any chance of undertaking the improvement works required now lie far outside the previous occupants reach.

The previous congregation was small and has adequately been accommodated by a neighbouring church which lies a very short distance away. The application building has been actively marketed with local estate agent Bury and Hilton since November 2022 until recently. Whilst it generated a reasonable amount of interest initially with 26 viewings undertaken all offers were subject to obtaining change of use to either commercial or residential use. The estate agent confirmed that no interest was shown at all from any part who wished to use the premises as a communal facility. It has therefore been demonstrated that a reasonable effort to market the property has been undertaken.

The application building is ideally positioned within a sustainable location close to the town centre and within easy reach of public amenities and services such as shops, cafes, restaurants and employment opportunities as well as being easily accessible to public transport including the town’s bus station and within walking distance to several car parks. Accordingly it is considered that the principle of the development is acceptable subject to other material considerations including design, impact on residential amenity and highway safety.

Design & impact upon heritage assets

Policy DC1 refers to design and seeks to secure development of a high quality which is designed to add value to the area to the respect the site and its surroundings. New development should promote a positive sense of place and identify through its scale, density, layout, siting, landscape, character and appearance.

Policy DC2 requires heritage assets and their setting to be enhanced and gives protection to designated and non-designated heritage assets.

Whilst the application building is not listed it is considered to be a local non designated heritage asset which is recorded on the County's record of historic significance as a mission church built in 1875 with unique architectural detailing. The application does not propose any alterations to the external appearance of the building and the only internal alteration relates to the removal of the existing organ. The proposed development would require the provision of a dust extraction system however this would be completely internal within the building. The proposed development would therefore preserve the architectural and historic significance of this non designated heritage asset and the adjacent Grade II listed buildings which lie on the opposite side of Belle Vue Road. Accordingly it is considered that the proposal accords with policies DC1 and DC2 of the adopted Local Plan and advice contained within the NPPF.

Impact on residential amenity

National planning policy dictates that at the heart of its core principles, planning should always seek to secure a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings. This is further re-iterated in CS Policy DC1, which seeks to protect residential amenity, in terms of satisfactory daylight, sunlight, outlook, privacy and soft landscaping as informed by the Council's 'Space about Dwellings' SPG.

The application building sits within a generous plot within an area of mixed development where commercial premises are intermingled with residential. It is not considered that the proposed use would generate any undue concerns in terms of noise or dust especially having regard to its previous community use. On this basis it is considered that the proposal accords with such requirements in relation to LP Policy DC1 and the NPPF.

Highway Safety

Paragraph 114 of the NPPF states: 'Plans and decisions should take account of whether: the opportunities for sustainable transport modes have been taken up depending on the nature and location of the site, to reduce the need for major transport infrastructure; safe and suitable access to the site can be achieved for all people and improvements can be undertaken within the transport network that cost effectively limit the significant impacts of the development. Paragraph 115 of the NPPF goes on to state that "Development should only be prevented or refused on transport grounds where the residual cumulative impacts of development are severe' as is reflected within LP Policy T1 'Development and Sustainable Transport'.

The previous use of the application building as a church did not benefit from any on site parking provision and had many visitors to the property. The number of users of the building will be significantly reduced and would not exacerbate that situation. Whilst no off street parking is provided the application site lies within a sustainable town centre location which is easily accessible by a means of alternative transport options. It is a short walk from the town's bus station and several public car parks are located within walking distance. On street parking is also provided within the vicinity. It is not therefore considered that the lack of car parking raises any concerns for this proposal. Having regard to the above it is concluded that there would be no adverse impact on highway safety and accordingly there is no conflict with LP policy T1 or with the guidance of the NPPF.

Ecology and Biodiversity

As there are no proposed physical changes to the site or to the external elevations of the building, there are not considered to be any ecological or biodiversity impacts.

CONCLUSION

The Framework sets out that there should be a presumption in favour of sustainable development and indicates that to achieve that, economic, social and environmental gains should be sought jointly and simultaneously through the planning system.

The application site lies within a sustainable town centre location and the application proposes a sustainable form of development and finds an appropriate economic re-use for this notable building which has been no particular use and could become at risk of loss or decay should it not be put to its optimal viable use. . The proposed development would not be prejudicial to the reasonable enjoyment of the existing residential properties nor would it affect neighbouring land uses. It lies within a very sustainable location close to public transport links and easily accessible on foot and bicycle. In this respect the proposal is considered to be an acceptable form of development and compliant with policies SS1, SS1a, C1, DC1, and DC2 of the adopted Local Plan as well as guidance contained within the NPPF.

The Local Authority is therefore respectfully requested to grant full planning permission for the proposed development in accordance with the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

7.0 DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

USE

The application proposes the change of use of the former church, which held its last service in 2018, into a joiners workshop and showroom with associated store, office and welfare facilities. Given the former use of the site it is considered that this would maintain the nature and character of the site and would integrate well and not unduly harm the neighbouring land uses.

AMOUNT

The area of the site measures approximately 1,870 sq metres in area with the application building having a footprint of 399 sq metres and an overall floor area of 423 sq metres. The proposed development would be carried out within the shell of the building without any extension.

LAYOUT

The layout is shown on the submitted drawing accompanying the application and centres around the change of use of the building. The existing external spaces will remain and the only internal change relates to the removal of the church organ.

SCALE

No alterations to the scale of the application building are proposed as part of this application.

LANDSCAPING

No landscaping is proposed as part of this proposal.

APPEARANCE

The appearance of the building will remain unchanged as no external alterations are proposed as part of this application.

PARKING & ACCESS

No changes to these arrangements are proposed and the existing access arrangements remain unaffected. The site is located within a sustainable town centre location well located to existing local facilities and public transport links are easily accessible to the site and other parts of the Staffordshire Moorlands as well as the neighbouring city of Stoke on Trent.