

Pre-Application Consultation on the Proposed Conversion of the Old School Room into a Flat

– closes Friday 17 January



As a reminder about this consultation exercise, please find enclosed a copy of the response questionnaire (pull out the middle two sheets), together with a copy of the leaflet that was enclosed with the last edition of Wagtail, and copies of the posters that were displayed in church in December.

This consultation is a formal part of the process to decide whether the village would like to see the Old School Room converted into a flat, subject to the church having first been adapted for use as a community space (as well as a place of worship). The plans involve major, permanent changes to facilities in the village, so it is important to have feedback from as many people as possible.

Thank you to everyone who visited the exhibition, and to everyone who has already completed a form.

Further information about the project, including copies of the various plans, reports commissioned during 2019, and an animated fly-through of the plans for the church, can be found online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

Completed forms need to be returned by the end of the day Friday 17 January, and can be put in the ballot box at the back of the church. Alternatively, if you call 07785 345380 or email PTWG.GVT@gmail.com, the form can be collected from you. Please also call us if you are not a computer user but would like to see paper copies of any of the project's work.

Thank you again for taking time to consider the proposals.

Gressingham Village Trust
Pearson Trust Working Group

With thanks to

the organisations that have provided financial support to investigate the feasibility of this project:

- the Department for Communities and Local Government
- the Architectural Heritage Fund
- Christopher Robbins Charitable Trust
- and Gressingham PCC

AHF Transforming
Heritage



Department for
Communities and
Local Government



Thanks also to Gressingham Parish Council and Gressingham Village Trust for their advice and guidance

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More information

Minutes of all Pearson Trust Working Group meetings since 2016 are online at wagtail.org.uk (under 'Useful Links')

All other documents referenced can be found in full online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

1. What is being proposed?

In recent times the Pearson family trust has helped fund some routine repairs for Gressingham church. But the trustees recognised this was not putting the church on a sustainable footing, and this, together with the declining congregation, meant the church was eventually likely to close, rather than be saved.

In 2016 Sir Nick Pearson proposed a future could be secured for the church building if it was adapted to become a multi-purpose community centre and place of worship.

To make the church building financially sustainable, he proposed that the Old School Room be converted into a rental flat which, together with the income from the existing first floor flat, should cover the costs of the church building. If the village collectively decided this was something it would like to see happen, the Pearson family trust would donate the capital in the trust - £100,000 - towards the costs of the project.

At a couple of meetings the village established a set of guiding principles they would want any project to adhere to, and identified a number of options they wanted examined. The Pearson Trust Working Group (PTWG) was then formed to examine the feasibility of the proposal and gauge the level of support within the community for such a project.

2. Why have I received this leaflet?

The Pearson Trust Working Group is looking for comments and suggestions about the proposals – both in general and, specifically, about the plans for the Old School Room.

A six-week formal consultation period on the plans for the Old School Room began with a village meeting on Friday 6 December, and runs until 17 January.

The PTWG decided that, rather than pursue a traditional planning application for conversion of the Old School Room, it would use a relatively new system called *Community Right to Build* (CRTB). A CRTB allows certain community groups to apply for permission to build (or in this case convert) community buildings or houses. An independent examiner checks that all the legal process and rules have been followed, and the local council then organises a referendum in which the local community (in this case in Gressingham and Eskrigge parish) votes on whether they support the proposal. If there is a majority in support of it, the local Council then issues a *Community Right to Build Order* (CRBO) – the equivalent to a traditional planning permission. In other words, the community, not the local council, decides whether the project should proceed. Given the village feels such a close ownership of the building, to have the community itself able to decide the future of the building seemed particularly appropriate.

Before the application papers are sent to Lancaster City Council, the law requires there to be a six-week consultation period at a point when comments and questions can be taken into account before the paperwork is sent to the council. It is this 'pre-application consultation' that is being launched at the village meeting on 6 December.

Later there will be another opportunity to comment as there will be a second consultation run by the council after the paperwork has been submitted.

This leaflet will hopefully provide some background to help you comment and make suggestions about the proposals, and let you how you can learn more.

For further information see the document *Understanding Community Right to Build Orders* at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

3. Why are we being asked to make a decision now?

Thanks to a couple of successful grant applications, the Pearson Trust Working Group has spent £20,000 on professional fees etc to assess the feasibility of the project. This has given us architectural plans for both buildings, a business plan, cost estimates, a specialist timber survey and an assessment of the significance of the church etc. In PTWG's opinion this gives us enough information to be able to make an informed decision about the project and the future of the Old School Room in a referendum. It feels irresponsible to spend more, highly sought after, valuable grant money, that could be being used elsewhere, if there isn't sufficient support to take our project forward.

PTWG will also use the result of the referendum as the way to let Sir Nick Pearson know whether the village would like to take him up on the kind offer of funding from the Pearson family trust. If Gressingham doesn't want it, the trust's money will be offered elsewhere.

4. Does a vote in support of the project in the referendum mean the project automatically goes ahead?

Definitely not. There are many challenges ahead as well as numerous checks and balances that mean this is not the case. For instance, in a Community Right to Build Order, the community writes all the conditions it wants to see attached to the permission (CRTBO). In this case, among the conditions that PTWG has drafted is one that stipulates that work to convert the OSR will only take place if the church has been adapted ('re-ordered') and brought into to use as a multi-purpose community centre and place of worship. In other words, works to the church would have to be completed, and the community space up and running, before the Old School Room can be converted into a flat. The village would therefore not be left without a community facility.

The conditions, as currently drafted, also say the owners/guardians of both buildings (Gressingham Village Trust and the Parochial Church Council) have to be satisfied that all the principles the village identified at the initial meetings in 2016 have been met. These principles included: a need for the project to have all capital funding in place before proceeding, and to be sustainable (ie to have the capacity to be retained and run over the long term); to provide better facilities than are currently available; to have the support of the village; and to maintain the character of the village and preserve its architectural heritage. Another one has been added: to make sure no future tenant could purchase the flat from Gressingham Village Trust under any right-to-buy type scheme.

Your comments on these conditions, including additional ones, will be especially useful.

For further information see the document *Draft CRTBO Papers* online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

5. What do the Old School Room plans look like?

A comfortable, well-proportioned two-bedroom flat of about 750 square feet can be made out of the ground floor of the building. The current kitchen and WC area can become a very light open plan sitting/dining room that opens out onto the side yard/garden. This would also be open plan to a kitchen area on the front of the building. There would be a generous size shower room in the middle of the back wall. One of the two double bedrooms would have the window on the gable end of the building looking towards the beck and the other one a window facing Fall Kirk.

The opportunity would also be taken to carry out some other general repairs and upgrading – such as adding double glazing to windows facing the road and finally solving the damp problems that seem to have plagued the building for the last century. There would be no changes to the exterior of the building.

Sorting out parking arrangements will be the biggest challenge as parking in the yard will not be allowed as visibility (the splay) onto the road is too limited.

For further information see the document *C Potts OSR conversion plans* online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

6. What is the plan for the church building?

In a 2017 consultation exercise, the village was shown a dozen different designs for how the church could be re-ordered to create a flexible, warm, multi-purpose community space and place of worship. It is a small building and it was immediately evident that to create any useable space most, if not all, pews need to be removed together with some other items – most likely, and most notably, the organ and the Marton memorial (although it is likely the memorial plaques could be saved).

The two clear favourite designs, together with an option that used aspects of each of the two favourites, were consulted on again last year; this time showing how the space could be used for the different types of events the village holds.

The clear favourite was the one taking aspects from the two original favourites. The architect has now drawn this up properly and shown it to be feasible. Immediately inside the door it has a small, easy to heat, meeting room (which could be treated as an entrance lobby when the main body of the building is in use). This room has multi-fold glass doors across the building that can be opened up for larger events. The ceiling of the meeting room can be reached by stairs in the tower so that it can be used for overflow seating at larger events. This space will be useful as conventional seating takes up more space than pews and we want to maintain the seating capacity at its current level.

There would be an accessible WC where the Marton memorial is currently situated, and a kitchen would takeover the area occupied by the organ.

As with the Old School Room there would be no change to the exterior of the building, although it is hoped to create a seating area on part of the upper churchyard.

For further information see the document *Coward Architects Option 13 plans and pictures* at <http://bit.do/PTWG>. Also available online: *Church fly-through - Option 13* (video)

7. How much is this going to cost?

As with all projects in their development phase, costs have been increasing.

In 2017 the estimate for the two favourite church options was £162,000 and £250,000 (after allowing for fees and risk contingency etc). This year the equivalent estimate for the new preferred option is £295,000, with most of the increase due to inflation.

Before committing to future use of the church as a community centre, the village made it clear it wanted to be sure it would not be taking on an unaffordable liability. PTWG decided it needed to make sure the church was handed over to the village in excellent condition with no repairs pending and all items in the latest church inspection addressed. The most significant, unquantified cost was for the

repairs needed to solve the long running problems of water leaks in the tower. Thanks to this year's grant funding the tower has been investigated closely and it has been found the damp is the accumulation of a number of factors but it has resulted in large areas of the core of the walls being washed out. The cost of putting this right, and replacing the roof which is also leaking, is £300,000.

This instantly made it clear the project could not go ahead without a source of significant additional funding and the obvious potential funder is the National Lottery Heritage Fund. If an application is successful, it brings with it an obligation to carry out various additional activities to showcase the heritage value of the building. The cost of this would add almost another £100,000 to the project, albeit the National Lottery Heritage Fund would meet all that cost.

National Lottery Heritage Funding also adds to the costs that have to be incurred in the project development phase, but again that additional cost would be met by them. The estimate for fees that have to be met before work could start on the church rises to £135,000 – most of which is architect fees for the detailed design work.

On top of this the current estimate for a good quality ('Do it once and do it right') conversion of the Old School Room is £60,000, plus fees.

In total the cost from this point to completion is estimated at £956,000.

For further information see the documents *Burns Collett 'Outline Business Plan'*, *H&R Rostron 'Damp and Decay in Church Tower' report*, *Bushell Raven Quantity Surveyor Cost Estimate*, and *Coward Architects 'Report of Condition – Tower'*, online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

8. Why can't the church pay for the repairs that are needed?

The Church of England has many hundreds of churches in a similar state to Gressingham, and does not fund the cost of church repairs. The responsibility for the church building lies with the Parochial Church Council (PCC) in each parish.

Gressingham's PCC has £7,000 in the bank and is facing a £300,000 bill which it clearly cannot meet. Although our village does have a separate Church Building Trust, with assets of £94,000, this also is nowhere near sufficient to meet the cost of repairs.

Ten or twenty years ago the national Churches Conservation Trust used to take on the care of some redundant listed churches. However, as there were so many redundant churches they quickly had as many as they could cope with, and they are no longer taking on any more. No other organisation has stepped in to fill that role.

9. Where is the money going to come from?

Most grant giving bodies for projects similar to Gressingham's generally award sums in the order of £10,000 - £30,000. To apply for, and win, what would need to be in the order of 40 separate grants like this would not be feasible; so, it is natural to consider applying for a National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) grant.

It takes time and effort to go through the NLHF application process but, if successful, the NLHF meets around 90% of eligible costs (in Gressingham's case it is very unlikely they would consider any costs related to conversion of the Old School Room as eligible). Separate applications have to be made for *development costs* and *capital costs* – and it's entirely possible to win funding for the development costs, and then fail to be awarded capital funding. The Working Group plans to make an initial approach to the NLHF in the New Year.

Sir Nick Pearson's offer of £100,000 and a NLHF grant for 90% of eligible costs would provide about £806,000 leaving the project needing to find a potentially manageable £50,000 from other grant giving bodies.

For further information see the document *Burns Collett 'Outline Business Plan'* online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

10. What are the chances of the project happening?

There are many reasons why it might not happen. The substantial increase in the cost of the project, due to the repairs needed to the church tower and roof, makes it more difficult to achieve, but the costs cannot be avoided. To meet two of the principles (or conditions) set by the village, the project cannot be a liability for the village, and it needs to be sustainable. In other words, the repairs have to be made if the project is to go ahead.

It is difficult to gauge the chances of success for the project winning NLHF funding. It only awards funding to a minority of the projects that apply, and, as their current funding strategy is still quite new, it is not easy to identify trends in what is winning support.

PTWG feels the project has been validated by having been awarded grants by both the bodies it has applied to in the past and having been able to carry out important studies to assess the feasibility of the project. In addition, the project already has matched funding available from the Pearson Trust, and having a robust and simple business model, such as Gressingham's, is important to the NLHF and makes the project more credible. PTWG will make as good a case as it can for support to the NLHF.

Finding funding is the big challenge but there could be many other reasons for the project not going ahead – be it the referendum not getting the required level of support, or conditions attached to the Old School Room's *Community Right to Build* not being met.

For further information see the document *NLHF Application Guidance* online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

11. What is the process regarding permission for changes to the church?

The proposed change of use of the church building does not constitute a change of use in planning terms, as the current use and the proposed use come under the same planning category; and as planning permission is not required for internal changes, planning permission is not required for the proposed changes to the church building.

But as the church is a Grade 1 listed building, listed building consent is required for all the proposed changes.

In the case of a Church of England building, listed building consent is granted by the Church of England's own robust internal 'faculty' process, by virtue of the 'ecclesiastical exemption'.

Every Diocese has a Chancellor (someone with the standing of a High Court judge) who has the power to determine whether to issue a 'faculty' to allow works such as those proposed for the building here. The Chancellor is advised by a Diocesan Advisory Committee, with which the PTWG has been liaising. The Diocese has many church buildings that are causing concern, and is encouraged by the situation in Gressingham, where there is a proposal that could put the building on a sustainable footing, and save it from closing, whilst maintaining its fundamental character.

Unlike local councils which (when considering listed building consent) can only consider the impact of the proposed changes on the physical building, the Diocese can also take into account the impact the changes would have on the work of the church, in the broadest sense – and therefore including the benefits the changes might have for the community as a whole.

As with the choice to use a *Community Right to Build Order* for the Old School Room, the ability to use a process for the church that takes into account community needs and benefits seems especially appropriate.

12. How can we afford to look after these buildings in the future?

One of the principles (conditions) the village has put on the project is that it has to be affordable and sustainable, so the PTWG commissioned a report to look into whether this is feasible.

The business plan report shows that the combination of the net income from two Old School Room flats, taking interest from the existing Church Building Trust and a continuation of the existing support from the Parish Council, should be sufficient to meet the costs of running a re-ordered church (insurance, heating, cleaning etc), including putting money aside long-term to meet future maintenance and repair costs. Any income from hiring out the building, or from donations, would allow a surplus to accumulate.

For further information see the documents *Burns Collett 'Outline Business Plan'* and *Coward Architects 'Maintenance Plan'*, online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

13. Why has the project been taking so long?

The PTWG has looked at several church re-ordering projects to see what can be learnt from them and it is striking how they tend to take eight to ten years from initial concept to completion.

Currently the timeline for Gressingham has completion pencilled in for January 2024 – exactly eight years after the initial meeting when Sir Nick Pearson put the proposal to the village. So, while it is a long period of time, it is typical for projects like this.

For further information see the document *Burns Collett 'Outline Business Plan'* online at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

14. What is being done about car parking at the church?

There is more space for on-road car parking close to the church than there is at the Old School Room, but to further improve the situation, Jane Paxman has offered to hand over the end of the paddock by Mill Bridge for use as off-road car parking.

15. What happens next?

A six-week pre-application consultation, leading up to the submission of the application for a *Community Right to Build Order* (CRTBO) for the conversion of the Old School Room, began on 7 December 2019, and runs until 17 January 2020.

As with previous PTWG consultations, comments received will be published in an anonymised format, and documents for the CRTBO will be amended to reflect the comments.

Lancaster City Council then runs a further consultation, and appoints an independent examiner to check the application has followed the correct process.

The referendum is unlikely to take place before late March 2020. The wording of the referendum question is laid out in legislation and will simply be 'Do you want the development in the Community Right to Build Order for [Gressingham] to have planning permission?'

PTWG will also be making contact with the National Lottery Heritage Fund in the New Year, and working on a lease for the church building.

16. What would happen to the church if the project doesn't go ahead?

PCC finances have been deteriorating faster than expected, and the PCC now has just £7,000 in the bank. On current trends this means it faces potential closure in about three years' time, but it could be earlier if any unexpected expenditure arises.

If the PCC cannot keep the church open, it will need to close. The Church of England does not step in to pay for upkeep and, now the Churches Conservation Trust is not taking on new churches, there are no other organisations that will step in. Given the difficulties in approving a re-ordering of a Grade 1 listed church, it is extremely unlikely that the more extensive changes needed for conversion to, for instance, a house, would ever be permitted.

The only foreseeable outcome is the village would be left with a locked up, decaying church building in the centre of the village.

17. How can I find out more?

Email or telephone the Pearson Trust Working Group as PTWG.GVT@gmail.com or on 07785 345380 and a member of the group will be happy to help.

All drawings and other documents, including the financial projections (the 'business plan') will be available at the village meeting and at the exhibition in church, and also online from 6 December at <http://bit.do/PTWG>

18. How can I comment?

Fill in the questionnaire/comment form that makes up the two centre sheets of this booklet (also available at <http://bit.do/PTWG>), remove it from the booklet, and place it in the box at the back of the church, or email it to the working group at PTWG.GVT@gmail.com, or sent to PTWG, Gressingham Hall, Gressingham, Lancaster, LA2 8LP.