

Proposal for securing a positive future for St Anne's Community Centre

Executive Summary

Today's St Anne's Community Centre has been an integral part of St Anne's Parish for almost 150 years. It was built in 1887 as a School and became the 'Parish Centre' in 1972. Since then, it has served both the Parish and the wider community of Buxton, providing a wide range of functions. In recent years it has been awarded many public grants and donations to enable it remain a viable operation, hence it's renaming in 2014. Subsequent grants and donations leave it now in a better condition than it has been for many years.

The proposal to sell the Centre came as a shock to many and the subsequent discussions have led to a range of alternatives surfacing. These have all addressed the perceived twin problems of financial viability and administrative burden voiced in November 2021: *“Not only a financial burden but an administrative and maintenance drain on the goodwill of our parish volunteers and my (Fr Gerry Murphy's) own time and energy.”*

This proposal builds on the emerging ideas and the fruits of an open Parish discussion and sets out a practical way forward that is based on the favourable financial picture revealed and progressively removes the administrative burden from the Parish.

A new “Centre Management Committee” (CMC) is proposed that takes on the administration of the Centre, in defined stages and under clearly spelt out arrangements with the Parish. These steps are an eminently feasible way forward, but, of course, the CMC would work flexibly with the Pastoral Parish Council (PPC) to address any emerging issues. Use of the Centre by the Parish is protected.

This proposal has many potential benefits for the Parish, particularly regarding its connection and its outreach into the local community.

Background

St Anne's School, built in 1887 adjacent to St Anne's RC Church, Buxton, became the Church 'Parish Centre' in 1972. Since then, it has served both the Parish and Buxton's wider community as a venue for numerous events and diverse users.

In 2010, the building needed significant improvements. Parish administrators (Fr Dennis Higgins and the PPC) agreed to external grant-seeking. Grants totalling £26.5K were obtained. In 2014, the 'Parish Centre' was renamed 'St Anne's Community Centre' to reflect its improved amenity and external use. Grant-seeking re-started in 2017 when the Parish became a 'Poor Parish' owing to a repair debt to the Diocese arising from a boundary wall collapse. However, a legacy (Fr Dennis Higgins) repaid the Diocese debt (and enabled £100K+ of Church maintenance). Subsequently, Parish administrators (Fr Gerry Murphy and the PPC) agreed the aim of continuing grant-seeking to increase Centre hire income through improvements in the facilities.

Since 2010, the total invested by outside agencies to bring St Anne's Community Centre to an excellent fit-for-purpose community amenity amounts to over £71,000. Improvements included: Main Hall re-flooring; public toilets; roof insulation and other energy-saving measures; repainting rooms; upgrading the kitchen to catering standards (including a commercial dishwasher); providing a hot-water service and a new kitchenette for the upper meeting rooms; Wi-Fi throughout, and installing hearing loops in the main meeting rooms. Several serious maintenance issues, e.g. window replacements, were also paid for. These improvements also benefited Parish users.

Plans to market the 'new' Centre pro-actively to build on an upward revenue trend were stalled by the 2020 Coronavirus epidemic, then were 'frozen' by the proposal to sell St Anne's Community Centre for property development.

The first the Parish heard of the sale plans was in November 2021. Apparently some in the Parish did know of the 2020 property development discussions and the pre-planning application reply from High Peak Borough Council (HPBC) in June 2021, but were bound by confidentiality. To date no relevant HPBC/Diocese correspondence has been released to provide parishioners' with full information. However, from 12 December 2021 a series of open Parish meetings have taken place where the sale proposal and possible alternatives have been discussed. Through this process it became apparent that the proposal of selling St Anne's Community Centre for property development is primarily based on the view that it is:

“Not only a financial burden but an administrative and maintenance drain on the goodwill of our parish volunteers and my (Fr Gerry Murphy's) own time and energy.”

This led to three proposals for other possible ways forward being proposed on 15 February 2022. These each sought to address the above concerns (viability and administrative burden). Based on the discussions and feedback at this meeting, these three ideas have been drawn on and adapted into this proposal, where further practical details have been worked through.

Demand for the Centre's facilities

There is no doubt that pre-Pandemic, there was vibrant and diverse use of the Centre by the Parish and others; external Centre hire had increased because of Centre improvements.

- The Parish used it for e.g. monthly coffee mornings, Parish socials, Sunday Children's Liturgy, 1st Communion and Confirmation Candidates' preparation, and PPC and other Parish meetings.
- Many groups regularly attended, involving a membership total of around 300 people. Examples are: 5th Buxton Guides, Brownies, Rainbows and Rangers; Buxton & District U3A Flower Arranging, Bridge Club and Wheelchair Exercise groups; Philately; Alcoholics Anonymous groups; Sewing; Embroidery; and Dog Training.
- Other Centre activities included: a non-Parish pre-school, Bingo, Women's Education Association programmes, fundraising events, private functions, such as lunches, birthday parties, social events, and use as a polling station.
- New ground was broken in a new community outreach initiative in 2019, when the PPC sponsored a 'Sunday Club' for the 65+ 'isolated elderly', having received £3,010 funding for that purpose.

During lockdown only the AA groups met; the pre-School operated to government guidelines and eventually closed. As restrictions eased, some previous user groups returned. The 'Sunday Club' is still in abeyance, although plans exist to get this re-started. Other groups have started hiring for the first time. The Centre's availability is important because social activity is known to remediate the impact of the Pandemic on people's mental and physical health.

External hire is increasing slowly, as the only 'marketing' of the Centre to date has been 'word of mouth' by users to others and, owing to limited capacity, the Parish Office just reacts to Centre hire requests. Further, until the Centre sell-off proposal is resolved one way or the other, current users are concerned about their future use (one major hirer left, but returned). This uncertainty is also likely to be causing possible hirers to look elsewhere, so reducing potential revenue.

Given the Centre's historical usage levels and its range of well-appointed facilities, it can confidently be expected that proactive marketing will increase the number and range of users significantly. This is key to the Centre's financial long term viability, but will increase the administrative burden. These issues are addressed below.

Finances of the Centre

The impression that the Centre is a "financial burden" appears to have arisen because the accounts show expenditure on refurbishments and improvements, but not the associated grant income that covered most of these costs. Annex A (provided to the PPC) provides full details, but the headline findings are that:

- The Centre is not a "financial burden" having generated a surplus over 2018-2021 totalling at least £37,000.

- Maintenance needs for 2018-2021 were met through hire income and grants e.g. 89% of the 2020 Tarmac Landfill Communities £10,750 Grant was spent on maintenance.
- 2021/22 Hire income is expected to be around £17,000 once all payments are in. However, hire was impacted by April/May 2021 Covid restrictions.
- Analysis of 2022/23 bookings (public on the Centre's website) gives an estimate of over £20,000 for Hire Income.
- Looking to the future, the Centre is in good financial health: surpluses compensate for the Pandemic loss of hire income and are expected to cover 2021/22 running costs with a surplus for 2022/23, even before 2021/22 hire income is taken into account.
- This is all without the anticipated increase in usage that could be reasonably expected to follow proactive marketing.

New Management of Centre Activities

This leaves the issue of the “administrative burden”. In this connection it is proposed that a new team will take on the work. This is set out below, together with a series of well-defined and progressive stages. These start with a “familiarisation” period of a month or two, a “status quo” period for the rest of the first year, leading into a “contractual agreement” period of say 3-5 years. These steps are described in clear terms as an eminently feasible way forward, but, of course, the CMC (see below) would work flexibly with the PPC to address any emerging issues.

New Team

The proposed new CMC is a 'core' of volunteers comprising: two retired company directors; a doctor; and three business owners (one being an accountant) who will have the following general roles:

- Management - John Cassidy, Peter Barrett
- Safeguarding & Booking - Sue Hardman
- Voice of Centre Users - Clare O'Neill
- Marketing & Fundraising - Bruce Thomson
- Finances & Record-keeping - Marion Redman (accountant)

The PPC would be asked if it wished to provide a PPC representative.

Additionally, volunteers with social-media skills have agreed to support the Internet marketing of the Centre. Further, there would be an open invitation to the Parish, so that any parishioners can volunteer to be involved should they wish.

Familiarisation Period

A short familiarisation period (say one to two months) is needed where existing Parish employees (particularly the Parish Assistant) and volunteers dealing with user tasks 'train' CMC members regarding all details of Centre bookings and user aspects to be transferred over. CMC members would help with the day to day management of the Centre alongside the current volunteers. Once all are satisfied that the 'knowledge-transfer' is complete, user-orientated Centre roles would transfer to CMC members

During the familiarisation period a 'Terms of Reference' document would be agreed that establishes the ground rules for the next, "status quo", period. Namely that:

- Beyond the CMC dealing with bookings and users, everything else would remain "as is". The Parish would receive all hire income and continue to be responsible for all Centre infrastructure management e.g. cleaning, property insurance, bill payments, organising major maintenance, equipment repair and emergency works etc.
- CMC members (and others helping) would be recognised as Parish volunteers, so having full Diocesan insurance cover.
- The CMC Finances & Record-keeping member would have full access to the Parish Buxton Accounts to set up and run a parallel 'cost-centre' accounting system for the Centre in readiness for a subsequent 'Contractual Agreement' stage. *[The Diocese Parish Accounting System is not suitable for generating a 'real-time' Centre finance picture needed for active management of the Centre.]*

'Status Quo' Period

The CMC would need, as nearly as possible, a full Parish Finance Year of operating (i.e. 1 April-30 March period) after the Transition 'handover', to ensure the smooth running of a parallel accounting system. It would also need one full annual account to give a basis for agreeing a 'rent' paid by the CMC during the subsequent 'Contractual Agreement' period.

During this year:

- The CMC would take on the user-orientated aspects of the Centre management.
- The CMC would begin actively marketing the Centre e.g. press releases, etc.
- The CMC would explore 'partnering' with local entities e.g. Connex Community Support (a Centre user), Zink Employability, Buxton Town Team and the Serpentine Community Garden Project.
- Discussions would occur with Buxton Parish Office to prepare for the subsequent 'Contractual Agreement' and agree a medium-term duration (3-5 years?) for it to run before review.
- The CMC would also start its own preparations for the 'Contractual Agreement' period, in terms of issues such as: producing a not-for-profit 'constitution' and considering moving to registration as a charity (with a possible name change) to further grant applications and donation initiatives specifically for the Centre and so remove the burden of administering such grants/charitable donations from the Parish Assistant. Non-profit/charitable status would also facilitate forming connections with the local entities mentioned above.
- By the end of the year, as a pre-requisite for the next phase, a mutually agreeable contract will have been established.

Contractual Agreement Period

This is essentially a 'Landlord/Tenant' contract. The Parish/Diocese as owner ('Landlord') of the Centre would allow and enable the proactive use of the Centre building's spaces and external non-parking areas by the CMC.

This would involve:

- The Parish/Diocese remaining responsible for: major maintenance of the Centre buildings; management of gas, electricity and water use readings; bills, rates and inspections; and, other matters not specified as the responsibility of the CMC e.g. rectification of loss of services (water, power, sanitation) and equipment breakdown.
- The CMC taking on day-to-day Centre 'internal' issues e.g. caretaking, cleaning, minor 'maintenance & repair'.
- The CMC taking over responsibility for explicitly-defined Centre operating costs e.g. minor maintenance and running costs (with property insurance continuing with the Catholic Insurance Services/Diocese system if providing the cheapest premium).
- The CMC would employ a Centre 'manager' for this 'Contractual Agreement' period to handle bookings and user concerns. All hire income would attribute to the CMC (or the constituted charity) to (1) meet agreed Centre costs the CMC would cover, (2) Centre 'manager' remuneration and (3) the setting aside of an agreed 'reserve' for future minor 'maintenance & repair' work. 'Rent' would be paid from the remaining surplus according to an agreed formula: that might be on a sliding-scale or % basis depending on the 'surplus' generated from the first full 'trading' year during the 'Status Quo' period. Procedures for taking hire payments by cash, BACS, cheque or credit/debit card would be agreed with Buxton Parish Office.
- New initiatives would likely be trialled by the CMC within the certainty of the arrangements for these 3-5 years. These could be, as examples, activities promoting the arts and wellbeing; a 'Community Cafe' specifically focusing on employment of young adults with special needs, enabled by grant-support; and, a 'Community Garden'.

Beyond the first 'Contractual Agreement' Period

After the first 'term' of 'Contractual Agreement' another term would hope to be agreed. However, the alternative of a 'Community Buyout' of the Centre might be explored with the Parish/Diocese during the first 'term', initially 'in principle' to determine Parish/Diocese attitude.

Parish Use during CMC responsibility

The Parish would continue its free use of the Centre for its normal planned activities, e.g. 1st Communion and Confirmation Candidates' preparation etc. These activities would be scheduled well in advance via the Centre Booking System. Other occasional events such as Sunday coffee mornings and Parish 'socials' would again be booked as soon as their organiser(s) identified a date. Bookings by the Parish and Centre users would be on a 'first come-first served' basis. If the Parish needed urgent access for a time already pre-

booked by an external user, compensation may be required for the user's loss of facilities.

Centre-Specific Grants & Donations

Seeking grants and donations will be a CMC core 'task' to support activities for individuals and to improve the Centre. Any applications for grants for building alterations e.g. installation of solar panels, would be agreed with the Parish/Diocese administration as required before application, but such activities for Centre maintenance/repair work or contributions to CMC costs should not need prior approval; and would be an unnecessary time-demand on Parish administrators. The Parish/Diocese would also be expected, on moral and ethical grounds, to respect the wishes of funders and those making specific donations for support of the Centre, whether these monies were routed via Parish/Diocese finance channels or not.

Use of the Parish's charitable status, prior to the CMC achieving charitable status, would be negotiated regarding funds only open to charities. The continued investment in the Centre by third party funders and donors, assumes, on their part, that the Centre will continue to serve Buxton's wider community for many years to come. However, should the Parish/Diocese, as owner, exercise a 'force-majeure' change-of-use sale of the Centre during any 'Status Quo' or 'Contractual Agreement' period so denying continuance of the Centre for community use, the Parish/Diocese on moral and ethical grounds would be expected to recompense funders and donors so that their investment is not 'sunk', but can be returned and re-directed to other community organisations, whether or not such contributions were obtained by using Parish charitable status or CMC non-profit or charitable status.

Benefits and Risks

Benefits of this approach are:

- Parish (and parishioner) reputational damage subsequent to removing a versatile Community facility for use by Buxton's wider community is avoided
- Potential financial loss of Parish expenditure in developing a Planning Application that is rejected by HPBC is avoided
- Revenue is generated for the Parish by the Centre's continued use as a Community facility.
- Parish reputation is enhanced in the wider community as Centre facilities improve and external use is increased

Risks of this approach are:

- Despite a pro-active approach by the CMC when under the 'Contractual Agreement', insufficient hire revenue is generated to cover costs. This eventuality seems unlikely, but if it came to pass, then all of the options being considered now are still available.