**MEETING OF THE PARISH COUNCIL OF THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD 23 SEPTEMBER 2023**

Present: Fr Celestine Onwuekwe; Phillip Slater (Chair); Sheelagh Foort (Treasurer); Kate Fox (Secretary); Celeste Slater, Josef Edel, Catherine Wellingbrook-Doswell; Robina Debnam; Gerard Walbank; Toni Brady; Steve Brady, Siobhan Evers

In attendance: Joe Butler, Pauline Butler, Simon Latham

**The Meeting opened with prayers.**

**1. Apologies for absence:** Dr David Beverley; Linda Wheater.

**2. Minutes of the Meeting held 16 July 2023**: Proposed Steve Brady, seconded Robina Dednam and signed as a true record of the meeting.

**3. Matters Arising from the Minutes not covered by the Agenda**: There were no additional items.

**4. Liturgical Matters:**

**Confirmandi**: An e mail had been received from Linda Wheater confirming that everything was going well with the next meeting planned for November in advance of the Bishop’s visit on 10 December.

**5. Health & Safety:**

**Safeguarding Role:** As there had been no response to the notice in the Newsletter for this essential role (following Linda Wheater’s resignation) Phillip has now undertaken this duty with guidance from the Diocese.

**6. Parish Finance & Buildings:**

**Chair’s Interim Report**:Earlier in the month the Chairman had circulated his report which reviewed the Parish’s precarious financial position; refurbishment of Our Lady’s House and the sale of the Thaxted Site. The intention was to (i) discuss the report in more detail, (ii) answer any questions and (iii) form short term strategies. Phillip was pleased to say that he has managed to re-open communication with the diocese and he and Father had a very constructive meeting with Monsignor Chris Brooks, Head of Finance, to discuss the diocese’ view of the situation.

**Thaxted**: He and Father met with Simon and Gerard, Amanda Baliki and a representative of Stretton’s, the auctioneers, at the Thaxted site. Prices are much lower than they were when the site first became available however the site could go to auction as soon as 24 October or later on 13 December. Since 1 September solid progress has been made. The Diocese will not dictate about the future and there is no hidden agenda as far as can be seen. It is up to the parish as to how we go forward and how and where money will be spent.

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Sheelagh asked what the situation was around merging, and the lack of priests and it would seem this was still up for discussion with no decision made. Fr Chris Brooks had referred to the renewal programme started in 2016 with the Stewards of the Gospel etc., when each parish was asked to come up with suggestions on how they could thrive. The Great Bardfield ‘team’ had spent many hours producing a submission, a copy of which Robina has and would pass this on to Phillip.

Father said he was originally told by the Bishop that at some future point Great Bardfield, Thaxted and Dunmow would potentially become three mass centres served by one parish priest, but no decisions had been made and issues around where the mother church would be had not yet been opened for discussion. Perhaps, the priest would live in the existing presbytery in Dunmow. Phillip said we should engage with Dunmow and see what the future might look like. Amanda Baliki had reported to Phillip, that across the estate, everyone’s buildings needed work – the issues faced by our parish were no exception, but we were in the unenviable position of being the first to be tasked with making some significant decisions about our buildings (by no means the last). Fr Chris Brooks advised that it was still not known where the best place was to locate a parish priest – various options are possible and need to be discussed openly, including: (i) using the presbytery in Dunmow (depending on the status of that building and its ongoing utility); (ii) spending the money required to upgrade the Bardfield site, housing the parish priest in the Bardfield priest’s house and using Our Lady’s House to house sick/retired clergy. Another scenario could be to sell both Thaxted and Bardfield (and possibly Dunmow) sites and establish a purpose-built church.

**Ownership**: In answer to a question raised by Joe, Phillip explained that the Legal ownership of our parish buildings is with the Diocese trustee company however the Beneficial ownership is with the parish. When the Thaxted site sells the fees are taken out of the proceeds plus a percentage (e.g. 5%) goes to the diocese. The balance of the monies remains with the parish for use by the parish.

There was an open discussion about the immediate future with contributions from Steve, Gerard and Catherine. Siobhan emphasised the importance of having a place of worship in the local community and that we need to be mindful of neighbourliness. Community should be at the heart of local Catholic provision, with both Bardfield and Thaxted providing excellent and accessible locations for worship for the surrounding villages from which we draw our parishioners. All concurred with the view and Phillip said that mass will continue to be said locally, the Diocese fully supports this, although we are being tasked with being open minded and creative as to buildings, locations and premises. Steve highlighted that, from his experience, it would be helpful now to establish a process and identify the stakeholders that would and should be part of the process, all discussion and the identification of the way ahead. It was agreed that a sub-committee would be identified at the next meeting.

**7. Finance**

Costs and Fund Raising: The cost of refurbishing Our Lady’s House versus the important and higher cost of repairs and upgrades to the chapel and priest’s accommodation were discussed. It would appear that the diocese would not approve of spending money on Our Lady’s House above the need to refurbish the chapel building – even though the cost placed on these works by the diocese’ valuer was considered rather high and that perhaps some works were not essential/required.

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Electricity Bills: Steve had been reviewing the high costs. He created a spreadsheet which indicated that from August ‘22 the bills went up by 300% with the new meter being read remotely. Prior to then all bills had been estimated (as no meter readings had been provided) and the increased costs may in fact now accurately represent our usage rather than vice versa. The initial view is that there is nothing to suggest our costs are out of line with usage for a building like ours (taking into account its age, the age of the heating system and therefore its relative inefficiency). It had been discovered that the water heater in the hall kitchen had been left on – this had now been addressed. Monitoring of our usage and bills will continue.

Donations: It was agreed that an appeal be made directly to the parishioners for them to increase their donations if possible whether by DD or in the plate.

Further Expenditure: It was made clear that we could not just spend what we wished, and the Diocese are clear that there should be no further significant single expenditure on our buildings until we have a clearer view of the way forward.

**Notes**

1. Phillip is going to meet with the Chairman of Dunmow PCC.

2. Request to increase parish donations – example the weekly running cost to make it easier to relate to.

3. Any funds coming in from the sale to be earmarked for future investment, pending which they would be placed on high interest deposit.

4. Our ‘plate’ receipts per head are twice what is received on average across the parishes (Fr Brooks).

**7. Going Forward**

1. Complete sale of Thaxted – this will buy us time.

2. November Meeting – refresh communications with the parish. Map out the work done and the way forward. Consider sub committees to deal with certain issues.

3. January Meeting – Continue the conversation with the Diocese, keep up with the plan project through 2024 and keep things moving (2024 dates to be agreed)

4. Financial situation not to be discussed outside the meeting nor that regarding possible future location

5. Rates: Following discussions with BDC, Phillip is in liaison with the relevant government department, and has lodged an appeal requesting Our Lady’s House be zero rated. This could save £6000 per year and if successful may even result in a refund of previous payments.

**8. Dates of Next Meeting**

This would be held on 18th November 2023. A date had not yet been set for the January meeting.

**Closing Prayers**

The meeting closed at 11.35am.

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