

## Statement of Need- Christ Church Sowerby Bridge

### Retention of chairs (currently authorised by a TMRO) for use in the gallery

#### 1. General information

Christ Church is the Parish Church of Sowerby Bridge. It is located on the main thoroughfare through the town at the centre and is in the conservation area. The population of Sowerby Bridge in 2011 was 11,703 and Church Urban Fund statistics based on the 2019 IMD index of deprivation show that our parish ranks 2,077 out of 12,382 where 1 is the most deprived parish. Particular problematic categories are: Lone Parenthood and People Living on their Own, (32% and 37.3% respectively,) Child Poverty (17.1%), and No Qualifications (23.7%).

The 2019 Church Electoral Roll was 51 souls. In normal times two services a week are offered by the church, a sung parish communion service at 10:30 each Sunday, which on the 2nd and 4th Sunday incorporates a family style of service. We offer a weekly junior church which runs during our main Sunday service. Tuesday Morning is our weekly mid-week said communion service. Average attendance before COVID -19 was 40 adults and 2 children at our Sunday services with 10 at our Tuesday morning service. Since COVID -19 when local/national restrictions permit we have opened the church for private prayer on a Tuesday morning, with 4 regular attenders and put in place a comprehensive risk assessment to make services secure against COVID. We have also used technology to record or stream church services from the vicarage during lockdown or even when church was able to open for those who did not feel comfortable in attending or could not attend due to the limit on safe seating. The numbers attending in person have fluctuated but not reached the levels as were at January 2019.

The graveyard is always open but the church building is not normally left open unattended during daylight hours. Prior to restrictions for COVID -19 we publicised the hours we open for public visiting as part of our commitments to Historic England and the National Churches Trust on our website, and Facebook page. These used to coincide with our 2 weekly coffee mornings for anyone to call in and we are open by appointment at other times.

In normal times, prior to the impact of COVID -19 we regularly hosted community events, participating in the annual Rushbearing and Artsbridge festivals. We have also hosted exhibitions from local schools, photography exhibitions and we take part in the Heritage Open Day annual festival. We play an active part in the community forging links with the flood wardens, local traders, local police and the Ward forum. Since May we have been part of the Ward Councillors' Sowerby Bridge COVID-19 Response group: meeting by zoom to ensure information about support is shared and everyone knows where to find help. Apart from worship and prayer, the Church also hosts monthly Mothers Union and Trefoil Guild meetings. Our Girlguiding groups meet in Christ Church school hall (our CofE VA School).

During the floods on Boxing Day 2015 Christ Church opened its church building to become a hub for up to 100 volunteers using the church as a base from which to help people. Since then Calderdale

MBC has formally appointed the church to be an official “Community Support hub” should the need arise again, not just for flooding but for any emergency incident in the area. We have installed Wi-Fi and a dedicated secure access to the CMBC IT systems with an “office” telephone line in church. We also have installed a bell sound system and “flood resource pack” to assist the flood wardens and Environment Agency response. In 2018/2019 we completed an electrical lighting refurbishment costing c£35k, providing us with emergency lighting so that for the first time the church can safely be used in the evening should an emergency arise and also gives us a dynamic and directional lighting system to allow us to host performances.

The Last Quinquennial inspection was carried out in December 2015 and we have addressed all but one of the category B and C issues, including refreshing the toilet area. The next Quinquennial inspection has been booked for 19 January 2021 and after a recent grant award of £7,500 we hope to be able to address the areas ranked D and any new issues that may have arisen. For many years the building has been a drain on our finances and despite significant grant funding these necessary repairs have required significant donations by the small number of members. Our long term vision discussed originally with the Diocese of Wakefield in 2013 was to improve the building so that it became better fit to be used more by our local community. We have been building momentum, and prior to COVID -19 were looking forward to the point where, rather than being a drain on our resources, the building would become an asset generating revenue to cover its running costs. This would release more of our offerings to increase our payment of the Diocesan Parish Share and for mission activity for growth with the aim to be meeting it in full. We had three concerts planned featuring the Overgate Hospice choir, the Gilbert & Sullivan Society and Steeton Male Voice choir: all were cancelled.

Since March 2019 we have even less income coming in as cash flow from fundraising events including special services and refreshment donations have ceased. Our utilities including insurance have been minimised but during the winter months we must continue to heat the whole church to prevent deterioration to the fabric. Therefore we have to carefully monitor every penny spent, even whilst creating new ways of worshipping to keep our already small congregation in the habit of “going to church”. Since lockdown was eased we have not regained the pre-existing levels of attendance. In one way this has let us better manage services, because the capacity of the church is now so limited due to the COVID 19 protocols that we cannot even seat all our regular members safely in the nave. If social distancing remains in place into 2022 or is needed due to the risk of resurgence until 2025 as per a Harvard epidemiological report<sup>1</sup> we run a serious risk of losing members of our congregation to more accessible buildings.

## 2. What is needed?

- a) **Immediately- whilst COVID protocols are needed.** We need to maximise capacity to seat members of the existing church family whilst social distancing constraints are in place due to COVID -19
- b) **Longer term.** We need to maximise capacity in the future to seat people attending services, such as the young people of Trinity Academy Sowerby Bridge, and at other community

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<sup>1</sup> ( [Projecting the transmission dynamics of SARS-CoV-2 through the postpandemic period | Science \(sciencemag.org\)](#) )

events in our building. Our strategy to meet our parish share in full relies on growth in church membership and generating income through better use by our community for larger social events and seasonal exhibitions /festivals. Using our venue for hosting local events was requested as a need in our independently conducted Parish Survey (2014). We currently have the largest public building in the town and have just been invited to join the “cultural consortium” formed to deliver the Sowerby Bridge High Street Heritage Action Zone cultural programme sub-group. This is a project running until 2024 with the aim of improving historic buildings and investing in a small zone of heritage buildings. Unfortunately the church is outside this zone. However, and more importantly for Christ Church, the project has a similar intent: to promote community events and activities and “make vibrant spaces where people want to meet up and spend time.” This is the ideal time to position the church as a welcoming venue before and while several other buildings are re-purposed to create new “vibrant spaces”.

### 3. The proposal

A TMRO was granted in early 2020 allowing us to store 110 redundant chairs from St. Andrews Church Holmfield. We seek to retain these recently acquired chairs **for use solely in the apex of the gallery** to allow us to increase the percentage of our usual Sunday congregation to attend as long as social distancing measures are likely to remain in place. Retaining these additional seats will also return the gallery to its full “safe potential” for use in the future, to cater for large community events proposed under the plans of the Cultural Consortium.

Whilst we have invested to create a one way flow through the building, the church’s interior layout is such that to operate a one way flow within the nave during services worshippers can only use the centre and north aisles. This allows the south aisle to be COVID safe for the vicar to enter the vestry and move from the vestry to the chancel and return. However it removes from use all the pews which open onto that south aisle except one: this is reserved for use by the vicar’s immediate household. The depth spacing of the Victorian pews is such that only one in every three can be used, and they must be staggered so that households on opposite sides of the central aisle are also 2m width apart. Pews closest to the nave altar crossing are also restricted to one individual, so the occupant is not within 2m of those waiting in a small queue at 2m distance to sanitize hands and receive communion. A significant number of our congregation attend as individuals so at times we have only been able to seat around 20 people in a nave which could under normal circumstances hold up to 270 people e.g. as seen at the annual Bolton Brow Academy nativity play. For those who are able and willing to climb the stairs, we have been able to safely open the gallery.

Christ Church has an unusual horseshoe shaped mezzanine gallery originally comprising three tiers of wooden benches with backs either side of a wooden divide, (see photograph). Access is similar to the nave pews each aisle descending in steps to give access to a tier of pews on either side. Under modern H& S standards the guard rail is too low to permit use of the first row and at the apex all three rows of benches were removed (in the 1980s when they were infected with dry rot). This left a large empty space for many years and the sides of the gallery were only used when unusual circumstances led to very large congregations e.g. for the installation of a new vicar or the memorial service of a well-known local teacher. The gallery was needed in 2019 for the visits by Trinity Academy Sowerby Bridge. Since the TMRO was granted we have been able to utilise the individual chairs to safely seat up to another 10 households or 10 individuals. Every Sunday we have

been required to use these seats. To lose them and have to reduce the “bookable” seats each Sunday would damage attendance particularly by those currently on the edge of our church family who may not be regular attenders and tend to decide at the start of their weekend rather than book their seat early.

#### **4. Why do you need it and why do you need it now?**

As we said in our original TMRO, we believe that this proposal will allow us to enhance our mission to the community we serve: for worship, mission and social activity.

The 110 chairs give additional capacity for worship whilst ever social distancing measures remain in place. Thereafter they could be used for large events at Christ Church as it is used more for community events. Retaining and re-using these existing chairs would be wholly in the spirit of the Diocesan environmental policy to minimise our impact on the environment.

We understand that they do not “match” the original gallery seating but this is not individually listed for any inherent historical interest and to reinstate like for like would not be permitted for safety reasons. We appreciate the chairs have fabric covered seats but this is not visible from the main nave and being positioned in the apex they are in clear contrast to, rather than a poor pastiche of, the original. We have consulted with Halifax Choral Society who have expressed their future interest in using the building and have been given confidence the coverings will not affect the acoustics of the building. See below the extract of a letter from their Vice Chair and Director, Nigel Castledine.

“We note that the chairs you already have in place in the gallery at the back of the church are upholstered. We feel that these are sufficiently distant from, and higher than the front worship/performance area, so as not to cause significant undesirable lessening of the acoustics of the building. However we suggest that any future choice of chairs to replace the front pews should not be upholstered, as these would be in close proximity to the worship/performance area. Long experience of performing in many different venues across the UK has clearly shown a deadening of sound and reverberation caused by ill-considered furnishings very close to performers. “

Finally and frankly we cannot afford to replace the chairs should they not be permitted to remain. In the short term we would lose the ability to keep even our core church family worshipping together as one. In the longer term we would also reduce the extra financial opportunity ticketed events would bring to help our building move to being a community asset rather than a drain on our members giving.

#### **5. What is the evidence for the need?**

The PCC have reviewed the attendance at services against the membership of the church which wholly substantiate that these existing chairs are needed both now and into the future. This Christmas Trinity Academy approached us to see how they could retain the experience for their pupils without visiting church and we provided virtual resources for them to use in school. This

shows that they are keen to use our building in the future when conditions permit. We are also working closely with the cultural consortium who want to bring more cultural events to the town. . As our aim is for growth in numbers and increased use by our community we had planned to launch a series of concerts increasing in numbers of participants and audiences. Our Parish Survey identified people would welcome local events but our experience is that some performers require us to sell in excess of 100 tickets or a minimum income threshold for them to appear, before we even to begin to recoup the cost of heating the building, staffing etc. More seats will enable more people to enjoy these community events and make the church better able to be self- funding as a venue.

## **6. How is the proposal contributing to the need for environmental sustainability?**

*How is it reducing the carbon footprint, contributing to the Church's commitment to reduce to 20% by 2050?*

The existing TMRO has mitigated the closure of St Andrew's Holmfield by re-using the existing chairs within the same deanery rather than have to transport them for re-use to a more distant location ( increasing use of fossil fuels in transport) or worse , send perfectly serviceable chairs to landfill. Our proposal has zero impact. It adds nothing extra to what has already happened in the past (except the small amount of energy consumed in producing this faculty document for you to consider).

## **7. What other options to meet the need were considered, taking Point 6 and the impact identified in the Statement of Significance into account?**

If the chairs cannot be retained at Christ Church beyond the length of the TMRO it is unlikely that there will be a ready market for pre-used chairs purposely designed for church use at a time when churches are closed / limited to smaller numbers and not likely to be experiencing growth. We will have to pay to have them disposed of, probably to landfill or incineration , involving at best the energy to transport them and possibly release of CO2. If we were in a position to purchase another 110 seats ( which financially we are not) and needed to match the solid pine of the original benches that would be a huge unnecessary use of timber from our environment plus the energy to craft it, and transport it to our church.