

4 April 2022

Good Evening,

My name is Sue Beeston and I am the chair of the Westlands Community Hall Group and Director of Westlands Community Hall CIC.

Wayne Hubby sends his apologies, but is currently out of the country and unable to attend this evening. I am, therefore, presenting this letter on his behalf.

Recently a number of Methodist properties have been sold. Many of these had been at the centre of their local communities and were sold, either at auction or through direct sales. In some cases this was to the highest bidder, with limited consultation and without giving local stakeholders the opportunity to negotiate a sale, or to arrange a lease. A recent example of this would be Knowle Top in Stannington, near Sheffield.

Our concern is that history should not repeat itself, here in Newcastle.

St Peter's Methodist Church and buildings are scheduled to be sold by auction, when the six months grace period, permitted by its registration as an the ACV, elapses. (This six months commenced on 3<sup>rd</sup> February this year). The premises are on covenanted land and there has been no consultation with the local community, or the Borough Council and limited dialogue with church membership.

The Westlands was designed by the same renowned architect who laid out the Bournville Village Plan: SA Wilmot. St Peter's Church is no exception. The buildings and plot itself are charming and designed in the 'Arts & Crafts' style of architecture, in sympathy with the surrounding properties.

### **The Restrictive Covenant that protects St. Peter's Church**

In the 1930's the undeveloped land on which St. Peter's now stands was sold to the Methodist church at what is believed to have been a below market price of around £770 with the protection of a full restrictive covenant granted by Newcastle Borough Council signed by over 20 people including the Mayor of the time, council and legal individuals as well as senior church representatives.

#### **The Restrictive covenant states:**

No building other than a church and/or Sunday School or Institute or Ministers or Caretakers House shall be erected on the plot of land and that the land to the rear shall remain free from development.

In the 1930's Restrictive Covenants were placed upon land and buildings to protect them for religious purposes or community use. Covenants were at the time respected and it was believed by those issuing and signing them, that such covenants would protect the land, or buildings they were assigning them to, for all time.

In modern times this is NOT the case, as restrictive covenants today are relatively easy for anyone (especially developers) to have removed, by negotiation with the council. Our community and all of those canvassed during our petition are

understandably perturbed by the idea of St Peter's being sold at auction, as this is likely to preclude any further use by the community.

Given the church and hall is built on covenanted land and was built with the aim to support the local community in line with the Bournville architectural design, the loss would be immense as there is no other land on which a replacement hall could be developed. Further to this, the Westlands estate has no park, no children's play area and owing to the estate being built on covenanted land, no shop, commercial premises or public house can be built. This makes the Westlands estate (not the Westlands ward) unique in this regard. The Methodist Church was integral to the community and the loss of the church and its premises is keenly felt.

### **The loss of St. Peter's and who it affects**

The buildings have been in good use for some 90 years and generations of our community have so many memories of the activities there, music classes, weddings, choirs, funerals, clubs such as rainbows, brownies, guides, rangers, and Sunday Schools having been held there. Additionally, in recent times (pre-covid), parent and toddlers playgroup, school holiday play schemes, art classes, maths classes, Ju Jitsu, philosophy, yoga and Pilates classes, have all used St. Peters.

We desperately need a Youth Centre and also a place where our older residents can meet, enjoy the company of others and spare them the loneliness that advancing years can sometimes bring. The loss will impact all age groups of our community, some of our most vulnerable and some of our oldest residents.

There was no, or very little, warning to user groups that the hall was closing and that they needed to collect their belongings immediately. Word of mouth was crucial to ensuring all groups were made aware of the situation.

The sole aim of the Methodist Trustees with relation to St. Peters is to dispose of the property to the highest bidder at auction. This is in complete opposition to the wishes of the community from which they are withdrawing.

### **Our efforts to encourage the sale to another religious or community group:**

There are 4 groups interested in purchasing which we are aware of, and have passed this information on to the Methodist Church.

1. The Westlands Community Hall CIC
2. The 7th Day Adventists Church
3. A Muslim Faith Group
4. The Redeemed Church of God

All groups wish to incorporate local groups: for example, drop-in cafe, room rental for all types of classes, food banks, summer fetes etc. to engage and support local groups and residents. All want to retain the existing buildings and focus on using the community rooms to serve the community. Additionally, the religious organisations would provide a place of worship for their large and vibrant congregations.

Discussion with two of the religious groups, showed a willingness to work together, to create a multi-faith community building.

Another religious group situated on the Westlands, would encourage and increase community input, participation and involvement and ultimately would enhance the local area.

None of the above religious organisations, however, have the financial capacity to complete with property developers and they all have until 3 August to raise sufficient funds before the ACV expires.

The Methodist Church can either sell for 'Best Value' or 'Best Price.' They have legal obligation as Trustees to obtain the 'Best Price', however, they can sell for 'Best Value' to a like-minded charitable organisation under the Charities Act 2011.

We have asked the Methodist Church to consider selling for 'Best Value' but have been unsuccessful and are continuing to pursue this route and will update the Council with any developments in this regard.

We are aware, however, that the Methodist Church have recently sold a premises in Newcastle Under Lyme for 'Best Value' to a local charity for less than the asking price when other groups had offered more money.

### **Our petition and why we took to the streets**

We wanted to make the Westlands community aware of the impending sale of St Peter's and the challenges faced by the community should they wish to retain the resource for the community in some form.

The petition has gathered over 500 signatures of Westland residents, and The Westlands Community Hall CIC group have more than 300 members, with more joining all the time.

By lodging our petition with you,

- We hope to garner your support in our endeavours to change the minds of the Methodist Trustees.
- We hope to raise our profile with both the residents and council members
- Ensure that the petition and level of support gained so far is shared in the public domain, through the council website, online forums, news items and the media.

We believe this will ensure any developer undertaking due diligence would see the level of opposition they may encounter, which in turn might influence their purchase decision.

### **What we are asking our Councillors to do tonight?**

We hope from this evenings meeting to be able to rely on the overall cross-party support from all of our councillors.

We are asking that the Council write to the Methodist Church to make clear to them the level of community and Council support, to save St. Peters. We hope that working together, we will persuade them, to take a community minded view and sell St. Peter's to a group that will retain it for the community, even if that meant getting a lower capital return.

Both myself and my wife have watched ninety-year-old residents fight to cross our driveway on Zimmer frames and with walking sticks to deliver their signed petition cards to us, mothers and fathers with small children who are cubs and brownies, Widows and widowers, who were married at St. Peters and are now so lonely. Our heartfelt thanks and appreciation would go to all of you if you could support us.

Special thanks to Councillor Simon Tagg, who has been incredibly helpful and to Daniel Dickinson & Geoff Durham.

Wayne Huby