

DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL CORE STRATEGY

INDEPENDENT EXAMINATION

HEARING STATEMENT OF JOHN SHEPHARD ON BEHALF OF NEW GOSPEL HALL TRUST

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 I am principal partner of J & J Design, a local architectural design and town planning consultancy established in 1975. I have appeared at a variety of planning policy inquiries and examinations, including several Regional Strategy EiPs and LDF public examinations. I have also participated in research projects regarding planning for faith communities by Three Dragons¹ and also CAG Consultants² with Land Use Consultants and Diverse Ethics.
- 1.2 I am a lifelong member of the Brethren's Christian Fellowship and a Trustee of Bedford Gospel Hall Trust.
- 1.3 I have previously acted for the New Gospel Hall Trust in connection with an additional Gospel Hall at Wood Lane End Hemel Hempstead³ and for an associated Trust in respect of a hall in West Valley Road Hemel Hempstead. I have advised the Trust on the emerging Core Strategy since 2011. The Trustees have previously also made representations.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 New Gospel Hall Trust was formed in 1978 on behalf of the Watford assembly of the Brethren Christian Fellowship as The New Meeting Room Trust and taking its current title from 2005. Brethren have assembled in Hemel Hempstead since 1884 using premises in Herbert Street. Since 1961 the assembly has included similar gatherings in Watford Borough and St Albans, with larger attendance meetings held at Blackwater Lane Leverstock Green (which lies within St Albans Borough) where the large hall was erected in 1994 with a seating capacity of circa 900. The hall at Gravel Hill Terrace Boxmoor was purpose built in 1965. The halls at West Valley Road (1998) and Wood Lane End (2010) were adaptations of existing dwellings.

¹ Facilities for Faith Communities in new developments in the Cambridge Sub-Region : Three Dragons for Cambridgeshire Horizons : November 2008

² Responding to the needs of faith communities places of worship : CAG Consultants in association with Land Use Consultants and Diverse Ethics for GLA : May 2008

³ LPA ref: 4/01971/08/FUL dated 13 November 2008

- 2.2 The Watford assembly, including the gatherings in Dacorum Borough, totals 245 souls in 67 households of whom 44 are living within Dacorum Borough. Numbers continue to grow and the Trust anticipate that additional halls will be needed within the Borough during the plan period. The Council are aware of a need for a site on the Kings Langley border or Leverstock Green/Adeyfield [**SC1 paragraph 7.2.8**]. The need in Adeyfield has been met by the 2008 permission but the Trust are now contemplating additional needs which have extended the area of search to other settlements including Berkhamsted. The Council are aware that a single user would be required. [**SC1 paragraph 7.2.8 last sentence**]
- 2.3 Provision of new halls in the area generally has been controversial in the past, often involving appeals after refusals of permission. There is intense competition for windfall sites and most undeveloped land on the urban fringe is protected as Green Belt. Loss of existing housing stock and adverse impact on residential amenity are common concerns. This all points to the need for clarity in policy for new places of worship in Dacorum.

3. DACORUM SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1 'Towards 2021 : The Dacorum Sustainable Community Strategy' [**BP3**] sets out a vision for Dacorum:

"Working together with make Dacorum a happy, healthy, prosperous and safe place to live, work and visit."

- 3.2 The following key aspirations may be identified:
- We aspire to high levels of welfare within communities that have shared values, fair opportunities and sound environmental management. Social objectives are mainly met through public, voluntary and community sector organisations.
 - Dacorum also has a thriving and dynamic voluntary sector which the Partnership wants to maintain. Opportunities to develop this sector and new ways of working will be explored.
- 3.3 The following statistics are also relevant:
- 15.6% of residents are aged 65 or more;
 - 18.6% of residents are under 15;
 - The over-65 age group is expected to increase by 41%;
 - The over-80 age group is expected to increase by 56% during the next 20 years.

3.4 Cross-cutting themes are identified on page 7. These include:

a) Promoting healthy and caring lifestyles

- We will improve tolerance amongst our communities
- We will encourage personal responsibility and value our surroundings
- We will encourage good parenting
- We will support a vibrant voluntary and community sector

b) Developing community cohesion

- We will encourage volunteering
- We will build family activity

These themes are further developed through the SCS. The Submitted Core Strategy [SUB1] at paragraph 7.2 recognises the function of the Local Development Framework as the 'key delivery mechanism' for the wider SCS.

4. NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY

4.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (March 2012) [REG15] has replaced most of the former PPG/PPS series of national planning guidance. The following NPPF policies are applicable to my representation:

- Paragraph 7 – which draws attention to the three dimensions to sustainable development. I am particularly concerned at the **social role** of the planning system.
- Paragraph 14 – which sets out the presumption in favour of sustainable development, including **plan making**. Key words include '*meet development needs of their area*' and '*with sufficient flexibility to adapt*'.
- Paragraph 17 – especially the final bullet point.
- Paragraph 28 – last bullet point which emphasises the importance of places of worship as part of the range of local services and community facilities, in rural areas.
- Paragraph 70 – first bullet point.
- Paragraph 171 – which acknowledges the linkage with community facilities including places of worship with health and well-being.

4.2 **Diversity and Equality in Planning – A good practice guide** (ODPM : 2005) draws attention to the relationship between diversity and the planning system.

- The Executive Summary refers to the diversity of society including varying faiths.
- Box 2 (page 21) provides a succinct definition of Sustainable Communities.
- Box 5 (page 27) highlights the linkages between planning and social inclusion.
- Key Message 10 (page 40) draws attention to the critical need for planning staff to understand local needs, future requirements and for monitoring progress.
- The Leicester case study (pages 157-160) includes the successful initiative in respect of places of worship.

4.3 The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012

These regulations recognise the need to consult with “bodies which represent the interests of different religious groups in the local planning authority’s area” – as “general consultation bodies” defined at Regulation 2 – Interpretation. I submit that views from such groups should carry significant weight in plan preparation.

5. REGIONAL STRATEGY

5.1 The East of England Plan (2008) [REG7] remains part of the statutory development plan, as recognised at Figure 7 of the Core Strategy [SUB1]. Faith communities from the region were represented at the Examination in Public by the East of England Faiths Council. Brethren’s Gospel Trusts made written representations. The following regional policies are considered relevant:

- SS1: Achieving Sustainable Development
- SS2: Overall Spatial Strategy
- SS3: Key Centres for Development and Change
- C1: Cultural Development

5.2 The explanatory text at paragraph 6.1 was amended to explicitly include “the diversity of the faith communities and places of worship”.

6. MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

6.1 The weight which the Government considers should be attached to the needs of faith communities and their relevance in modern society is illustrated in a recent article published by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in the ‘Daily Telegraph’ on 12 September 2012.⁴ A copy is annexed to this statement.

7. QUESTIONS FOR HEARING SESSION – ISSUE 8: MEETING COMMUNITY’S NEEDS

7.1 The Inspector has raised the following questions for Issue 8:

8.1 *Have the needs for open space, sport and recreation facilities been appropriately assessed? Is the Council’s evidence base (e.g. 2008 Open Space Study) sufficiently robust?*

8.2 *Is the Council’s approach to the provision of community facilities satisfactory? Will community needs be met? Policy CS23 refers to Zones being defined in the green belt for new school facilities. How will this be achieved? School facilities will also be supported on Open Land, which is defined as areas of open space over 1ha, protected from development. Is this approach justified?*

⁴ ‘A Christian ethos strengthens our nation’ : Eric Pickles : Daily Telegraph 12 September 2012

8.3 *Proposed minor change MC31 suggests that additions to the identified provision for community facilities 'are possible'. Where and when will such additions be identified and why can they not be identified in the Core Strategy?*

7.2 In response to question 8.1, I have no comments on open space, sport and recreation facilities. However, I would draw attention to the parallel evidence base for Social and Community Facilities – Background Study [SC1] dated January 2006. This is clearly dated, especially in regard of National Planning Policy. Section 7 of the study provides a useful but somewhat dated over-view of faith facilities in the Borough. Brethren's needs are recognised at 7.2.8. However, the Leverstock Green/Adeyfield requirement has been met. The Council correctly record that *"In accordance with the Brethren beliefs this would be used solely for religious purposes."* We submit that this is not recognised in Policy CS23.

7.3 In response to question 8.2, I would respectfully submit that the Council's approach to the provision of community facilities is unsatisfactory. The Trust welcomes the recognition of 'worship' as part of 'Social Infrastructure' at Figure 14. The Trust also welcomes paragraph 15.1 and 15.2. In respect of 'Education' the Trust also welcomes the recognition of the private education sector at paragraph 15.10. However, Policy CS23 undermines the **effectiveness** of the Core Strategy due to the policy being unduly prescriptive and lacking in flexibility by reason of the requirement for 'multifunctional use of space', together with the promotion of dual use of new and existing facilities. These requirements are diametrically opposite to the existing and proposed uses of Brethren's Gospel Halls in the Borough.

7.4 Brethren Gospel Halls nationwide, indeed worldwide, are dedicated to the Worship of God and religious instruction. Regular weekly services include:

- The Lord's Supper
- Gospel Preachings
- Prayer meetings
- Bible Readings

In many cases, social and recreational uses have been excluded by planning conditions, in order to limit potential nuisance and adverse impacts on residential amenity. Brethren's Gospel Halls are open to suitably disposed persons for all services, with the exception of the Lord's Supper which is restricted to regular communicants.

7.5 However, my clients would resist any proposals for new places of worship to be 'multifunctional' or 'dual-use'. They would also resist any proposals to introduce 'dual use' retrospectively to an existing facility as a lever or condition of grant of planning permission for any new place of worship.

8. CONCLUSIONS

8.1 For all the above reasons New Gospel Hall Trust conclude that as submitted Policy CS23: Social Infrastructure is unsound. In particular, we submit that it fails the following soundness criterion:

- 1) **positively prepared** in that the policy seeks to introduce restricted uses for new and existing facilities
- 2) **justified** in that the policy ignores the clear evidence of the Council's background paper [SC1]
- 3) **effective** in that the policy conflict with the representors position is likely to prevent delivery of additional facilities to meet acknowledged needs
- 4) **consistent with national policy** in that the NPPF and the recent Ministerial statement accept the need to make provision for new community facilities including those needed by Faith communities in a flexible and positive manner

8.2 We have proposed the following changes to address our clients concerns:

- a. Second paragraph Policy CS23 – amend (b) to read:
(b) may provide for the multifunctional use of space where appropriate
- b. Delete the third paragraph.

8.3 I respectfully invite the Inspector to recommend accordingly.

J R Shephard
September 2012

A Christian ethos strengthens our nation

Religion shaped the modern British state, and this Government is proud to 'do God'

By Eric Pickles

8:36PM BST 12 Sep 2012

Christianity in all its forms has shaped the heritage, morality and public life of Britain; and Christian belief continues to influence our society for the better. The fact that Britain has welcomed people of many other faiths to live among us over the centuries in no way detracts from this. Indeed, it is the Christian ethos that has made Britain so welcoming. As the Prime Minister declared in December, we are a Christian nation – and should not be afraid to say so.

Christians continue to be positively involved in public life, from the role of Anglican bishops in scrutinising legislation in the House of Lords, through the moral leadership offered by Christian leaders, to the contribution of thousands of churches and Christian charities to the social fabric of our neighbourhoods with their volunteering and sacrifice. Religion is the foundation of the modern British nation: the Reformation is entwined with British political liberty and freedoms, the King James Bible is embedded in our language and literature, and the popular celebrations of the Royal Wedding and Diamond Jubilee placed the Church side by side with our constitutional monarchy.

Faith communities provide a clear moral compass and a call to action that benefits society as a whole – and the Government is grateful for this. The Coalition has an explicit “integration” strategy to bring communities together. While we should confront extremists who spread hate and division, I believe that mainstream, tolerant religion binds society together.

At a time when Christians are under attack for their beliefs in different parts of the world, I am proud of the freedom of belief that exists in Britain. But there is no room for complacency. To suggest that Christians in our country are literally persecuted would be to demean the suffering of those around the world facing repression, imprisonment and death. We should, however, recognise that long-standing British liberties of freedom of religion have been undermined in recent years by aggressive secularism, especially in the more politically correct parts of the public sector.

When in office, New Labour’s spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, declared: “We don’t do God.” By contrast, I think this Government does. We are committed to the right of Christians and people of other beliefs to follow their faith openly, including by praying in public and promoting their beliefs – as well as wearing religious symbols. Employers, especially in the public sector, should not stop employees wearing visible religious symbols except where there is a common-sense reason, such as a genuine safety risk.

Banning discreet religious symbols for reasons of political correctness is not acceptable. We should challenge the nonsense that religious displays could “cause offence” and therefore should be hidden from view. The Government’s opposition to a European Court of Human Rights challenge on crucifixes should not be misinterpreted as supporting secularism: rather,

we are resisting Brussels interference and gold-plating of what should be a matter for common sense.

Christians also have the right to be heard by policy-makers. In my own government department, we have funded the Near Neighbours programme, working with the Church Urban Fund and its parish network to build stronger communities. We have resisted a legal challenge by the intolerant National Secular Society to ban town hall prayers. We have changed the law to safeguard and entrench the right of councillors to pray at the start of council meetings should they wish, as has been the British tradition for centuries.

Of course, the Christian perspective is one of many that have to be balanced in a broad-based, tolerant society. I recognise that the Government's consultation on equal civil marriage has created a strong reaction from many in religious circles. In particular, there are legitimate fears of European Court of Human Rights challenges and churches being forced down the line to conduct such ceremonies against their wishes. These concerns need to be explicitly addressed in any legislative reform to provide safeguards against such coercion.

The interpretation of human rights laws cuts both ways: just as we have resisted gold-plating made in the name of religion, so we must resist spurious legal challenges against religion. Nor should we allow equality laws to open the door to moral relativism and reduce established religion to the equivalent status of any other belief. We should not be bashful about asserting that the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church have a greater role to play in the public life of our nation than the Church of Elvis or the Church of Scientology.

I believe that the Christian Churches have a unique position in British society and a particularly strong claim to be heard. We are a stronger country when we embrace the religious character of our nation, and when we champion what unites the British peoples across class, creed and colour.

Eric Pickles is Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government