Project: Refurbishment of Digswell Village Church
Client: Digswell Village Church
Job No.: 2420
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Design and Access Statement

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INTRODUCTION

This Design and Access Statement has been prepared by MEB Design Ltd on behalf of Digswell Village Church to support a planning application for the refurbishment and partial reordering of the church located on Warren Way, Digswell, Welwyn, Hertfordshire. The proposal aims to enhance the building's accessibility, sustainability, and functionality to better serve both the congregation and the wider community.

The proposed works include internal reordering to reduce level changes and create a flexible multifunctional hall. Accessibility features will be upgraded, including the installation of a new platform lift and accessible WCs, as well as improved circulation. Externally, the plans include hard landscaping enhancements, the addition of entrance canopies to improve wayfinding, improved parking and paving, and thermal upgrades to the building fabric. New bicycle racks and a designated bin storage area are also proposed. The church will continue to function as a place of worship and community gathering, with no change to its current use.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The church occupies a standalone site adjacent to residential properties, with vehicular access via Warren Way and pedestrian access from surrounding footpaths. The location is well-connected, being near Welwyn North railway station, which provides links to London and Cambridge. The site is not in a Conservation Area and the building is not Listed.

The church community dates from the 1930s when children's groups and services were run from private homes and in the village hall. In 1954, a dedicated church hall was built on a site donated by Mr. T.J. Lock, on what would become the new Warren Way estate. In 1964, after significant fundraising efforts, the church was expanded with the construction of a hexagonal church building, which included adjoining ancillary rooms. This new church building was formally opened in 1964. The building has continued to serve as a central place for worship and community activities. In 2024, the church received two legacies to fund the proposed renovations, for which planning permission is now being sought. More information on the church's history and development can be found at www.digswellvillagechurch.org.uk. In 2017, a previous planning application (6/2017/0342/FULL) was submitted and approved for a more substantial redevelopment and rebuild option, which proved unviable.

Figure 1: Aerial view of Warren Way, Digswell, Welwyn AL6 0DH (Copyright – Google Earth)

CURRENT PROPOSALS

Church Vision Statement: 'Our vision is to be a Christian focus at the heart of the neighbourhood where all are welcome, find peace and celebrate the joy of knowing God'.

The church is a centre for local people, which aims to reach out to the community and embrace all. Digswell Village Church is a Methodist Church working in an ecumenical partnership agreement with the Anglican Parish of Digswell. The buildings are used for Christan worship and other community groups including 'Tuesday Get Together', 'Coffee Morning and Warm Welcome' and the monthly 'Gentleman's Breakfast Club'**.** The Brownies and Guides meet weekly and other non-Church groups also hire the hall regularly.

Strategic Plan:

In July 2024, MEB Design Ltd was appointed to conduct a Feasibility Study to assess the church building's suitability for modern worship and current uses. The study identified several areas for improvement, including accessibility constraints and the need for general refurbishment works. The building is arranged over four internal levels connected only by steps. As a result, there is no wheelchair access to most meeting rooms and the worship hall, an issue that must be addressed give the building's public use. The strategic vision developed from this study focuses on creating an inclusive, flexible, and sustainable environment that supports the church's long-term mission.

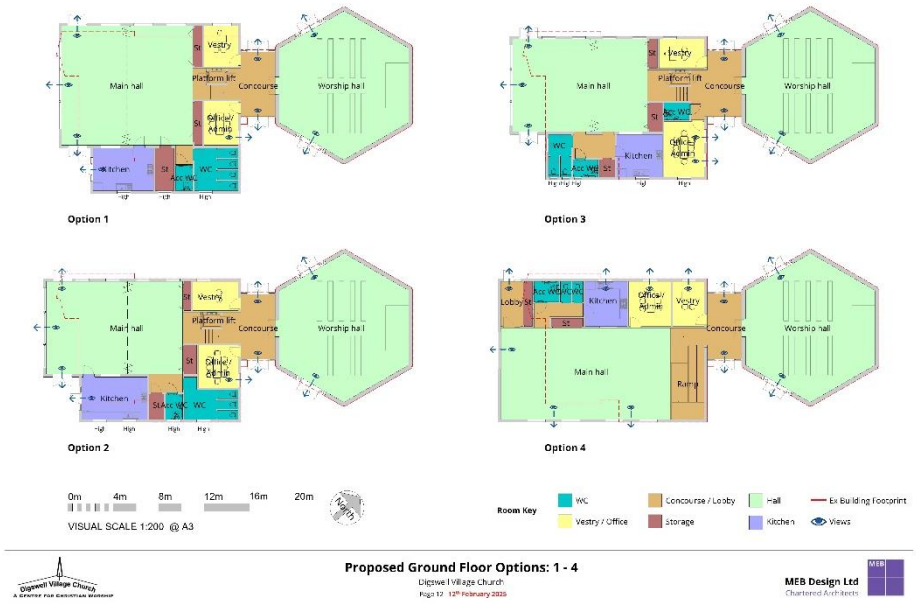

Figure 2: Options evaluation sheet presented as part of the feasibility study

Consultation:

In April 2025, the Church hosted a community consultation event to gather feedback on the proposed plans, engaging both members of the church family and invited neighbours from the surrounding area. The design was well received, with no objections raised. The morning session took place after a church service and included the church family, which comprised of approximately 32 adults mostly over the age of 50 and 4 children. The public afternoon session was attended by 9 neighbours and 5 members of the Development Committee, including the Minister and the senior Church Steward. The presentation boards displaying the plans were also put up following Sunday services, giving those who missed the consultation event an opportunity to review and comment on them.

The plans were also discussed at the Church Council meeting on February 17th, 2025, where they were approved. In addition, the refurbishment proposals were discussed at the monthly Men's Breakfast on April 5th, 2025. The event was attended by 15 local members, most of whom are not church members, and included two District Councillors and two Parish Councillors.

Figure 3: Photo of the public consultation event

DESIGN

As explained above, the proposed scheme has been developed over a period of time with appropriate consultation of key stakeholders. The following section sets out how the designs have developed and provides justification and explanation for the key design decisions.

Use:

There is no proposed change of use for the church or hall as part of the refurbishment. The proposal seeks to unify the smaller meeting areas of the existing building and open them up to form a flexible, multifunctional hall to serve the church's future needs. The halls are currently available to hire by the local community for local groups, events, and use by Digswell Village Church. There is no proposed change to the operating hours of the building.

Amount:

The existing building has a gross internal area of approximately 300sqm, and the proposed changes do not alter the total internal space. The primary objective of the proposal is to improve the building's accessibility and sustainability performance. Internally, the floor levels will be consolidated, reducing the number of levels from four to two, which will create a more open and accessible main hall. To further address accessibility, a platform lift will be introduced to connect the ground and upper ground floor levels, ensuring all areas of the building are accessible to all users. The upper ground floor will feature a relocated accessible WC, complete with a baby change unit, while the ground floor WCs will undergo renovations, including the addition of a new accessible WC. The kitchen will be enlarged and upgraded to provide better catering facilities for the hall's users. These upgrades, along with general interior refurbishments, will improve the building's facilities to better serve future users

The worship hall walls will be insulated internally, and the existing brick exterior surface will be retained. Clerestory windows will be replaced with openable double-glazed windows to improve thermal performance and ventilation. The roof of the worship hall will also be insulated externally, with the existing tiles being replaced like for like.

To enhance the building's environmental performance, the hall section will undergo external insulation, finished with natural timber cladding. This cladding will feature both horizontal and vertical orientation complementing the existing architectural language of the building, as timber cladding is already present on the north elevation. Wrapping the building with a single cohesive material will unify the various additions and extensions and improve the overall street scene. The existing doors and windows will be replaced to improve the building's energy efficiency and aesthetics. New doors will feature accessible door swings, and the main entrance will be fitted with automated, power-assisted double doors.

Additional external improvements include a secondary roof covering to improve thermal efficiency, which will result in a slightly thicker roof that will not alter the building's character. Due to the consolidation of floor levels, approximately 40 sqm of the upper ground floor ceiling will need to be raised to align with the existing height of the raised flat roof. This adjustment will be minimal, ensuring the building's overall aesthetic integrity remains unchanged.

Externally, the proposal includes the addition of three timber entrance canopies, providing sheltered access points and enhancing the building's visual appeal. These canopies will also improve the arrival experience for visitors.

While the number of parking spaces will remain the same, two new accessible parking bays will be added near the entrance. The existing car park will be resurfaced using a permeable bound gravel grid system, so there will be no change in surface water runoff. The resurfacing will also create clearer pedestrian zones, improving wayfinding through the site.

The current main entrance patio is uneven and too small to accommodate the church's events which run throughout the year. The proposal includes a new patio to replace the existing, providing a level and accessible surface leading to the building's main entrance. Existing paths will be regraded to make the site accessible from all entry points.

A new uncovered bike rack will be installed to accommodate six new spaces, supporting sustainable transport options, as the current site lacks bicycle storage. Finally, a three-sided timber fence bin storage area is proposed, providing a designated area for waste and recycling. The storage and collection of waste materials will follow the existing management plan.

Layout:

The proposal seeks to consolidate the number of internal floor levels within the building to improve accessibility for all users. The existing meeting rooms will be opened up to create a multifunctional hall that can be partitioned into separate spaces using a sliding/folding wall. Adjacent to the hall, the kitchen will be enlarged and equipped with a servery, offering improved catering facilities for users of the hall. A platform lift and stairs will be installed to connect the two floor levels, addressing the current lack of lift access in the building.

On the ground floor, a new accessible WC will be located next to the existing WC facilities which will require an existing window opening to be repositioned. The upper ground floor will feature a relocated accessible WC, which will include a baby change table. In the vestry, the floor height will be raised to align with the new upper ground floor level, requiring an adjustment to the existing window opening height.


Figure 4: Existing meeting spaces arranged over several floor levels

Scale:

The scale of the proposals is in keeping with the existing rhythm and dimensions of the building. The canopies will be proportionate to the scale of the building and will be positioned below the existing eaves. They will extend out from the elevations, clearly marking the entrances and creating a welcoming presence from the street. The proposed bike rack will be set back from the car park and designed as an open structure to minimize its visual impact and mass.

Landscaping:

The proposal aims to regrade certain areas of the site to enhance accessibility, eliminating the need for steps by grading paths and creating accessible patios. New planting beds will be introduced, helping to soften the building's appearance and integrate it more seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. All existing trees and planting on the site will be preserved and remain unaffected by the proposed changes.

Appearance:

Photovoltaic panels will be discreetly positioned, set back from the roofline and designed to be unobtrusive from street level. The existing building features timber cladding in certain sections, and the proposal extends this cladding across the entire main hall to unify the design. This approach will unite the building's different architectural sections and improve the overall streetscape. The existing building features a brick chimney and water tank which this proposal is seeking to remove which will further improve the building's appearance.

The current windows are a mix of white UPVC plastic, stained timber, and painted aluminium and will be replaced with high-quality composite timber/aluminium powder coated double glazed windows that mostly reuse the original window openings. Two windows on the north elevation will be relocated, but the overall scale and balance of the building will be preserved. The window

alterations to the south elevation will see the existing window openings reduced. The canopies, cladding, and bin area fencing will be made from timber, selected for its natural, soft appearance that complements the overall design.

Access:

The new double-leaf main entrance doors will feature powder-coated aluminium frames, with double-glazed vision panels to allow natural light and visibility. These doors will be power-assisted and designed to provide an enlarged, fully accessible opening width. External levels around the entrances will be locally regraded as necessary to ensure level access into the building. The ground floor will have level access throughout, with the worship area, vestry and second accessible WC accessible via platform lift. Two accessible parking bays will be located near the entrance with gently graded pathways directing visitors from the car park to the main entrance. By incorporating these inclusive design elements, we are ensuring all users will have equal and convenient access to the buildings and its facilities.

Energy efficiency (Sustainability Statement):

All new doors, glazing, and windows will be upgraded with double-glazed units, offering a significant improvement over the existing installations in terms of both thermal efficiency and visual quality. Insulation enhancements will be carried out throughout the building. These include internal wall insulation in the worship hall and external insulation to the church hall, which will be finished with new timber cladding. This will significantly boost the building's thermal performance and reduce heat loss. A new insulated roof covering will be installed, further contributing to the building's environmental performance. The existing rainwater harvesting system will be retained, with water collected via water butts for reuse on site. Surface water management will be maintained with new permeable gravel, ensuring that the development does not increase surface water runoff. New sanitaryware and fittings will be dual flush and low flow to reduce water consumption.

Internal and external lighting will be upgraded to low-energy LED fixtures, reducing electricity consumption and operational costs. A new air-source heat pump will be installed to replace the existing gas boiler, providing a sustainable and low-carbon heating solution. The system will be partially powered by new photovoltaic panels installed on the roof. Together, these measures will significantly enhance the building's sustainability and reduce its overall environmental impact.

Noise Impact Assessment:

No changes to the existing use and activities of Digswell Village Church are proposed, and therefore no additional noise is expected from the building. Where the external fabric, windows, and doors are being upgraded, the new items will be double-glazed with better sound isolation properties. The air-source heat pump will be appropriately positioned away from neighbours' habitable windows in accordance with relevant planning guidance and noise assessment criteria.

Daylight / Sunlight Assessment:

No new building footprint is proposed and therefore there is no impact to the daylight and sunlight on or adjacent to the site.

CONCLUSION:

This project has been designed over time through a process of consultation, evaluation, and design development, as outlined above. The character and design of the existing building has been carefully considered, and the proposals are appropriate in both scale and appearance, responding sensitively to the site and its surroundings. The scheme improves accessibility, sustainability, and functionality while maintaining the integrity of the existing structure.

This Design and Access Statement demonstrates that a thoughtful and appropriate design process has been followed. The proposals represent sustainable development consistent with proper planning principles, and we respectfully request that planning permission be granted for the scheme.

Environmental: Rainwater Recycling & Collection

Services: Air Source Heat Pump

Walls: Coated Timber Boarding

Doors: Double Glazed Powder Coated Aluminium Double Doors

Windows: Composite Aluminium / Timber

External Features: Timber Slatted Bin Store

Roof Features: Discreet PV Panels Set Back from the Roof Line