



Cwm Planning & Design Ltd.
(Civil, Structural & Architectural)

PLANNING STATEMENT

-Justification of loss of community facility-

Project: Proposed redevelopment of former Ebenezer Chapel, Rhos
(Change of use to a single residential dwelling)

Date: 24th September 2023

General Introduction:

This planning statement has been prepared to accompany a planning application to redevelop the former Ebenezer Chapel, on Neath Road, Rhos, into a single residential dwelling.



Photograph shows front Elevation of Former Chapel, fronting Neath Road

The former Ebenezer Chapel is in an urban location, fronting Neath Road, in the village of Rhos. Rhos is located approximately 2.5 miles to the south east of Pontardawe and 2.5 miles to the north of Bryncoch. The town of Neath is approximately 4 miles to the south of the subject property with Swansea approximately 10 miles to the south west.

The plot is fairly large with the imposing main former chapel providing an important feature within the Community. The vestry building to the rear also forms part of the planning application and is proposed to be retained in its current form but converted to be used as ancillary residential accommodation.

The existing driveway will be retained and a new fence installed to demark a footpath to maintain safe public access to the cemetery at the rear.

The Proposal:

LDP Policy BE2 requires that “all development proposals that would affect building of local historic, architectural or cultural importance will only be permitted where:

- 1) *They conserve and where appropriate enhance the building and its setting; or*
- 2) *It is demonstrated that the development could not reasonably be accommodated without affecting or replacing the building and the reasons for the development outweigh the heritage importance of the building”*

It is felt that the historic and local significance of the building outweighs the need to demolish and redevelop the site and as such it is proposed to retain all of the existing buildings and their features. The external appearance of the building will be enhanced by the repair and replacement of the wall coverings together with upgraded window and door systems. The stonework facade and arched stone lintels will be further enhanced by their cleaning, repair and repointing of open and loose mortar joints.

Internally It is proposed to form a new single dwelling within the existing building envelope, to comprise new living space with kitchen etc to the ground floor and the formation of a first floor mezzanine level to accommodate 4 bedrooms and a bathroom. The kitchen / dining space to the ground floor will be double height with a gallery landing and library book shelving above.

Externally the current access and driveway being utilised. Private parking and turning can be accommodated within the application site boundary together with sufficient amenity space. The existing vestry building will remain unchanged and be used solely for the occupancy / additional living and storage space for the applicant.

All new construction (internal walls, floors etc.) will be as sustainable as possible, with ecological efficient systems explored and used where possible. Rainwater and Foul drainage will be directed to the existing system.

Justification for the Loss of an Important Community Facility:

LDP Policy SC2 states that “any proposals which would result in the loss of an important existing community facility will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated that:

- 1) The facility is surplus to requirements; and*
- 2) The existing use is no longer viable.*

The original use as a chapel diminished over a period of approximately 5 years and was subsequently but reluctantly forced to sale.

The chapel was formally purchased on the 30th October 2023 with the initial memorandum of sale circulated in October 2022, 4 months after the initial sale was tendered. A marketing Strategy report is included within the application documents, prepared by the estate agents dealing with sale.

The majority of offers were aimed toward the residential development with only one potential purchaser proposing use as a commercial / community use – no exact details are available, but the offer was subsequently withdrawn.

After liaison with the former custodians of the chapel and congregation members, it was determined that the ageing congregation and lack of new members coming into the chapel was a major factor in the decision to sell. That and the unfortunate covid pandemic resulted in the further loss of congregation and was felt the upkeep and maintenance of the chapel was too much given the numbers attending.

It was also stated that the lack of funding from grants etc to maintain both the chapel and vestry building and to in effect keep the ‘electricity on’ along with the general routine maintenance of the grounds was again too much.

Former uses of the Chapel and Vestry Buildings:

The chapel was used by the existing congregation up to circa January 2022. Leading up to this, and during the covid pandemic the use as a place of worship was restricted and so congregation numbers fell.

The chapel has in previous years served the local community with annual Christmas concerts, Harvest Concerts whilst also playing host to the local primary school’s Christmas Nativity plays.

The vestry building has mainly been used for small community meetings such as the Local Women’s Institute, craft meets, Sunday school, bible teaching and occasional use by the local angling society for general meetings, *when other venues were not available*. The number attending the Sunday school and Bible teaching diminished over the years and subsequently ceased circa 2019.

Existing Community Facilities:

Rhos and neighbouring Alltwen and Gellinedd all benefit from a Community or Village Hall. Alltwen and Gellinedd also have Local Chapels where regular congregations still attend. These chapels also provide Sunday school, Bible Groups and play host to occasional W.I Groups and craft meets. During the spring and summer months there are fairs and playgroups also using the facilities.

Rhos Community Hall provides various activities and is a key facility within the village. It is available for hire for community groups, parties and commercial events and is used extensively. Examples of the various current and previous activities include:

- 'Crafternoons' – a craft meet weekly
- Pancake / cookery activity – monthly
- Slimming world meeting - weekly
- Kids art Club (during school holidays)
- Karate – weekly
- Dog training classes
- 'Mens shed' – Mental Health awareness meetings – monthly
- 'Repair / Recycling events – Monthly
- Welsh language classes - Fortnightly

During the weekends and school holidays the centre also plays host to Rhos FC , Mini Dribblers and a tuck shop where proceeds go to various local charities and Rhos FC.

Alltwen Community hall is also open for private hire for parties, community groups and commercial events. Examples of the various current and previous activities include:

- Kickboxing club – weekly
- Parent & Toddler Groups – weekly
- Circus Skills - weekly
- Ballroom Dancing - weekly
- W.I Craft Classes and teas – weekly
- Welsh language classes - Fortnightly

Alltwen also benefits for a local Rugby Club with teams ageing from Under 8's through to youth to First Team (adult) level.

Gellinedd, whilst being a smaller community has provision for community groups and meetings within its village hall and chapel and is also available for private and commercial hire.

Given the above, It is felt that there is ample provision within the community of Rhos and neighbouring villages to accommodate the various community groups, parties, meetings and events to enable the existing chapel and vestry building to be lost as a community facility.

Rhos community Hall itself is extensively used with a variety of events and meetings from local groups taking place regularly.

Following various discussions with the former custodians of the chapel it was stated that no interest or enquiry, withing the last 5 years especially, to hire out the vestry building for a community use or meeting was applied for.

The remaining existing congregation now attend the sister chapel in Alltwen for weekly prayer meetings and Sunday services.

As such the proposal to convert the buildings to residential use should not have a detrimental impact on the extent, variety and attendance of the various community groups, classes and events already being held within the locality.

Development of the Proposal and impact on the Welsh Language:

The SPG states that:

"The Welsh language is an integral part of the social fabric and an important element of day to day life in many areas within the County Borough. Whilst some areas contain very high levels of Welsh speakers, the erosion of the language in recent years has become a great concern. In preparing the LDP, the Council has adopted a committed and proactive approach to the protection, promotion and enhancement of the Welsh language with the following objective aiming to: OB 25: Preserve and enhance the area's cultural heritage and identity with a focus on the Welsh language in language sensitive areas.

It's understood that the area does have a low percentage of Welsh speakers, which has further reduced over the years, and is acknowledged that the loss of this community facility will have slight impact on that number, especially locally. The existing congregation, the majority being elderly are very well spoken in Welsh and do converse with each other in the Welsh language. Sunday services, held in the sister chapel in Alltwen are also conducted partly in Welsh.

It is however felt that the various groups, parties and meetings held in the other community facilities should not affect the community's ability to develop the language with the loss of the chapel and vestry. Previous Welsh language classes were held and these should be promoted and adopted.

The proposed development into a single dwelling departs from any direct mitigation measure as the applicant is obviously unable to promote the development of the Welsh language personally within the community. As such it is welcomed that any financial contribution as requested in the SPG will be complied with in order to promote any of the Local Authority's mitigation measures within the community.