

Minutes

Pulford St Mary – Public Consultation meeting

Date: 20 July 2026

Time: 7pm start.

Location: Pulford St Mary

Attended by: Michael Gilbertson (Archdeacon of Chester), Stephen Torr (Incumbent), Stephen Hughes (Church Commissioners), Caroline Hilton (DAC Secretary)

Members of Pulford St Mary, members of public and members of the Parish Council (the meeting was well attended)

MG offered some words of introduction and explained that the PCC would explain their proposals for the church and that questions and comments were invited from the floor

ST then addressed the meeting, setting out the following points of explanation:

- The PCC had stated a year ago that it proposed to start the process for closing the building for regular worship.
- The closure was proposed for two reasons, lack of financial resources and lack of human resources. It is a very small parish in terms of population numbers, but the parish has two listed buildings to maintain. In order to manage the finances going forward they are therefore considering closing the church.
- There are two churches serving a very small population meaning the parish's spiritual needs could be met using one building
- The parish cannot afford to pay full parish share so he is only funded for a part time rather than full time role.
- Maintenance and cleaning – people and money are needed to keep up with this.
- The oil fired boiler has stopped working and needs replacing and under CofE Net Zero policy, churches are not usually replacing oil boilers. Due regard has to be given to Net Zero and it means replacement of heating can be more costly and time consuming. If grants were available, who would write the grant bids?
- If ST carries out all this administrative work, it is taking away from being a priest
- The church and churchyard are two separate things. The closure of the church would not affect the churchyard (which is separately being 'closed' having run out of burial plots and responsibility will need to transfer to CWAC).
- Why close Pulford St Mary instead of Eccleston St Mary? Eccleston St Mary is on Dule of Westminster's estate and therefore obtains financial support (whereas Pulford does not). Closure of Eccleston St Mary has been discussed but is not proposed as the church has financial support, good links with the local school, it has toilet facilities and over 1000 burial plots still unused.

SH addressed the room, explaining the legal framework that governs the process if a church is to close for regular public worship. SH explained the following points:

- The Mission & Pastoral Measure 2011
- If the PCC proposes closure there are a number of stages this needs to go through for it to legally happen.
- Starting point is informal consultation, ie this public consultation meeting
- The formal closure process was then explained, including formal consultation and draft scheme.
- The key test under the Mission & Pastoral Measure is whether there is a continuing pastoral need for the church.

CH addressed the room, advising that her role at the meeting was to take minutes of the meeting as a record of the discussion at this meeting, and that she was carrying out any necessary diocesan administrative work for this process.

Questions and Comments from the floor

Cllr Murray of Parish Council spoke:

- Noted how much administrative work ST has to deal with, taking him away from his work as a priest
- Voiced surprise that the Parish Council had not been told earlier of the problems faced by the church. Noted the church is in Pulford Conservation Area.
- Important from Parish Council perspective to remember that the building symbolises 800 years of worship in this place/close to this place. First stone church was built in 16C. In 19C the Duke of Westminster had donated the equivalent of £1.4 million to repair the leaking roof. In 1991 a fire had destroyed the bell tower. The late Duke of Westminster had provided funding towards the rebuild. Without these examples of significant capital funding, what would now be standing here?
- Previous funding had come from outside of the church. ST is burdened with pressure, may be the local council/population can help.
- Our duty is to ask, what has brought the church to this position? Less than 60 attendees recorded for both churches, so roof and boiler could tip them over the edge.
- Once closed, for a new owner, ecclesiastical exemption ceases so they need to obtain both PP and LBC for any adaptation to this Grade 2* listed building so development is very restricted
- Order for Council has not yet been done regarding the churchyard. Public access will need to remain for the churchyard.

Cllr Murray then raised the following questions:

- Under MPM2011 the Church Commissioners' duty is to use any endeavour to keep the building open. Is closure in the face of roof repair bill etc using 'every endeavour'?

- If yes, then the closure still needs some insurance of the building still having maintenance needs addressed. Does it not suggest that the Church Commissioners will give support as to how the building can be used?
- Before the 35 day formal consultation period, can the Church Commissioners give people the longest possible chance to look at this, ie can they give the local people/parish Council up to 2 years to find a new use?
- If closure is necessary, the church was built at a time when it was traditional to put in a reverter clause. Have the Church Commissioners viewed the deeds, to check whether there is a condition that the building remains as a place of worship? Are there restrictive covenants?
- If there is closure, the Parish Council will wish to know of the existing state of the church and churchyard.
- Has the CBC report been done? Can the Parish Council see it?
- Will the Church commit to putting part of the proceeds to one side for the Parish Council/those who will foot the bill?
- Will the Church Commissioners guarantee that the contents are not disposed of once the doors close?
- Noted Bolton All Souls, Kings Lynn St Nicholas examples of well kept closed churches. Parish Council can achieve similar viable/effective outcome if given time to.

SH answered:

- Legal duty under MPM to seek suitable alternative use for the building in the event of closure being confirmed, - partnership between Commissioners and the DMPC
- Churches Conservation Trust take on closed buildings that fit certain criteria, this is a later stage in the process post closure, in the event that a use cannot be found.
- Timescale – process is dealt with by the Church Commissioners Pastoral team. There will be other opportunities for comments before anything is finalised, there is a good amount of time if people want to keep the doors open.
- The 2 year period is the time for the diocesan use seeking period post closure
- If looking to close, the deeds and any covenant issues will be gone through as part of the process. It is taken into account as part of due diligence, eg checking any historic conveyances. (SH explained in response to questions from the floor regarding the order in which the process is carried out, that the public consultation meeting is a starting point).
- Closure would not be confirmed until all legal checks and covenants have been confirmed.

MG commented that if people have ideas to help the PCC, they were welcomed to voice them

Question:

How much is the total cost of the upkeep of this church including funding the vicar? The Duke of Westminster is a multi-billionaire. Why were covenants not looked at first? Has anyone properly asked the Duke of Westminster for funding?

ST answered:

Estimated £7-10K insurance, plus fuel (but when oil boiler replaced not sure what it will be replaced with). About £500 per month (£6K per year) parish share, but should be double that really. Duke of Westminster's estate has previously been approached and does not wish to provide funding for this church due to its separation from the estate.

Question:

Why can't heating be replaced with heat pump?

MG answered:

Summarised CofE Net Zero target and guidance. If oil or gas based it is not impossible but parishes are required to make a very strong case for it. Suitability of heating system depends on the building and its use. Heat pumps are not necessarily always the most suitable option.

Question:

Deficit needs to be recouped, so a business plan is needed in the community to offset it. How would the CofE support the community?

MG answered:

If there are practical ideas for how funds can be raised please do come forward and speak with the PCC.

Question:

The building needs to progress into the current day and age. There are no kitchen or toilet facilities and that is a big 'down', and it is only used on a Sunday. It should be used by the people every day. Maybe get lottery funding? A lot of people would benefit from it being open every day with facilities.

Comment in response from the floor:

The village hall satisfies that need, if it didn't exist then things would be different.

Question:

There have been rumours and misinformation about the church. The Parish Council needs regular updates about this matter to ensure they have the correct information.

MG answered:

Apologised if it was felt there had been a lack of communication, but things were still at a very early stage and the point of this meeting was to enable communication.

Comment in response:

The questioner (from the Parish Council) clarified that he was not accusing the church of spreading disinformation, but rather that inaccurate rumours had been doing the rounds in the village. **MG answered:**

This meeting is testament that the PCC and diocese do want to hear peoples' views.

Question:

Good to see so many attending this meeting. (Remembered the funding campaign after the 1991 fire, there was real support, the church was full for a couple of Sundays and then it reduced back down to the faithful few.) If this many people attended on Sundays the church wouldn't be in this situation.

MG answered:

Some people may not wish to visit the building to worship, this should be a place for everyone.

Question:

Even if people did not wish to worship regularly, they might still be interested in supporting the future of the building. **MG answered:**

The Parish Council don't have responsibility for the church if it closes. Responsibility would go to the DBF until an alternative use is found. The churchyard closure is coincidental it is being closed as there is no more room for burials in it. The churchyard closure would happen regardless of whether the church is being kept open or closes.

Question:

What is the timetable going forwards with this? How is there for the community to come up with an alternative?

MG answered:

There is no fixed time table, but the time pressure arises from the time pressure described by ST regarding lack of financial and people resources. Happy for ideas but can't wait indefinitely.

Question:

Is there at least an idea of a time scale to aim towards?

MG answered:

It would be better for the PCC to address that, and for them to communicate to the Parish Council.

Comment:

IA church member reminded the room that as well as the heating issue, there are also problems with the roof, which is also in danger of failing.

Local actions noted:

The Parish Clerk to be the point of contact at the Parish Council.

A paper sheet was left for those who wish to be kept informed to add their contact details.