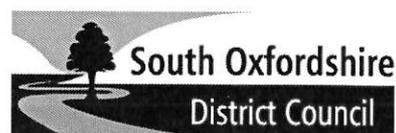


## Planning

Head of Service: Adrian Duffield



Listening Learning Leading

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ABINGDON OX14 4SB

19 February 2018

**Ref: P18/S0082/PEO**

Dear Ms Walker,

**Location: Fairmile Cemetery, Henley-on-Thames, RG9 1AA**

**Proposal: Converting the First Chapel into a columbarium. \*\*\*Letter Only\*\*\***

Thank you for your recent request for pre-application advice for the proposed conversion of the First Chapel into a columbarium at **Fairmile Cemetery, Henley-on-Thames, RG9 1AA.**

### Context

Fairmile Cemetery is located on the outskirts of Henley-On-Thames within the parish of Bix & Assendon and contains two chapels, a gate house and graveyard built in 1868. Both the Non-conformist and Anglian chapels are Grade II listed in their own right not least, because of their group value as the centrepiece of the Victorian cemetery landscape which remains largely unaltered since its conception.

The freehold of Fairmile cemetery was transferred from South Oxfordshire District Council to Henley Town Council in 2009. Title deed ON191022 includes a restrictive covenant - to ensure the property remains in use only as a cemetery. Having fallen out of everyday use, permission for the variation of the restrictive covenant was granted to allow for the conversion and use of the Non-conformist chapel to a visitors centre in 2012. This project was never realised and the Non-conformist chapel does not, and has not had any specific use for many years and today remains vacant.

Both chapels have relatively recently undergone extensive remedial repairs securing the listed buildings, using methods in keeping with good conservation practice.

The chapels are constructed in knapped flint with freestone dressings under steeply pitched clay tile roofs with bands of shaped tiles and crested ridge-tiles. The doorways and window openings have pointed-arched stone lintels with some geometric decorated tracery details. Internally the Non-conformist chapel has simple

chamfered chancel arch and scissor-braced roof and has at some point seen all internal fixtures, fittings and its bell tower removed.

### **Proposals**

The proposals outlined in this application describe the conversion of the Non-conformist chapel to the eastern end of the cemetery grounds for use as a columbarium (*a room or building with niches for funeral urns to be stored*) following a scoping exercise where options considering the conversion of the chapel to, 1) a dwelling 2) an office, and 3) a pet crematorium and columbarium were explored and dismissed as less preferable compared with the proposals to be assessed as part of this application.

The conversion will require; new lighting; security key card entry systems; free standing 'niches' (bookcase like structures) arranged around the existing nave with the western vestibule to be retained largely as existing as an oratory, for private devotion and contemplation. The sketch plans supplied as part of this application indicatively suggest the conversion of the chapel to a columbarium is likely to involve only minor alterations to the existing fabric of the listed building.

### **Development of the churchyard and historic burial ground**

The cemetery, chapels and grave yard were transferred to the local authority under the Open spaces act 1906. This act requires *'the local authority to hold and administer the burial ground for the enjoyment of the public as an open space, under proper control and regulation'*. In light of this, I recognise the importance for the Town council to accommodate the changing needs of the cemetery and its users and in principle have no objections to the change of use of the Non-conformist chapel that is no longer in everyday use.

Although burial sites are on occasion developed for other purposes, most are not, not least because they are valued locally a resting place for the remains of many generations. In my opinion, there is a clear social obligation to preserve the use of the chapel for operations associated and consistent with the wider use of the cemetery and grounds.

Should you wish to pursue applications for the conversion of the chapel to either an office or dwellinghouse you will need to provide sound justification for the loss of this important amenity asset at the centre of the historic Victorian cemetery landscape and the potential impact of the proposed uses on the cemetery setting by way of a conservation management plan in line with guidance from English Heritage and English Nature (in *Paradise Preserved* published in 2002).

In my opinion the proposed conversion of the chapel to a columbarium (pet or human) would be an appropriate redevelopment of the building as a way to secure its longer term viability. A columbarium as described is a use consistent with the existing pattern of use at the cemetery, would not require any planning permission for the change of use of this site and subject to consultation with the relevant department at South Oxfordshire District Council is likely to be interpreted as complying with the restrictive covenant set out in the title deed ON191022.

### **Setting of the listed building and curtilage listed structures**

The church does not benefit from ecclesiastical exemption, and as such the works proposed will require listed building consent. Whilst, I recognise the importance to support development which enables the long term viability of the chapels at Fairmile cemetery I am not convinced that the public benefits of a single dwelling or small office building in this location would outweigh the potential harm to the significance of the building and its setting. Carrying out this balancing act is a requirement of planning policy; nevertheless you should be clear the scales generally weigh in favour of the preservation of the listed building and its setting.

In line with my comments made above the consulting SODC conservation officer is broadly, supportive of the proposal to convert the listed Non-conformist chapel to a columbarium as a way to *'provide it with a useful and viable future which will enable and encourage its maintenance'* in the longer term.

In terms of the impact on the listed building and its setting the columbarium is favourable to the suggested office or residential unit as *'this requires the least intervention into the building fabric and would be more consistent with the established purpose of commemoration and worship for which it was originally intended'*.

The niche cabinets proposed appear to be free standing fittings as such, *'the impact of these on the fabric of the listed building would be limited and reversible'*. The proposed conversion would have a measurable impact on the character and appearance of the interior of the chapel specifically the nave, however, I am mindful to agree with the conservation officer's view that in this case the *'benefits of a viable use are likely to outweigh any minor harm caused by these changes'*.

Any final application for listed building consent should include details of all internal alterations fixtures and fittings as well as visuals demonstrating the impact the proposed conversion would have on the internal character and appearance of the chapel and should be informed by a Heritage Appraisal and Impact Assessment proportionate to the significance of the building and the proposed works as per Paragraph 128 of the NPPF.

Broadly speaking the proposed conversion of the Non-conformist chapel to a columbarium complies with policies CSEN3 of the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy (SOCS) and C7, CON1, CON3, CON4 and CON5 of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan (SOLP) which seek to protect the historic environment, listed buildings, structures and their settings.

### **Summary**

I recognise the importance for the Town council to accommodate the changing needs of the cemetery and its users and in principle have no objections to the conversion of the non-conformist chapel where the proposed use is both consistent and compatible with the wider use of the cemetery.

Subject to the submission of details informed by a Heritage Appraisal and Impact Assessment proportionate to the significance of the building and the proposed works including a suitable assessment of the visual impact on the interior of the chapel which contributes to the historic interest of the building and Victorian cemetery setting inside of the Chilterns AONB, the proposed conversion of the chapel to a columbarium would in principle be acceptable as it complies with the national and local planning policies for works to listed buildings within a cemetery setting.

I attach a full copy of the conservation officer's comments.

I hope that the above comments are helpful but please note that they are not binding on the council in respect of the formal determination of any planning application submitted.

**Please note**

*Any amended plans that are received after the issuing of this letter, which require more than minor assessment, will be subject to additional charges. Additional charges applying to follow up advice can be found on our website at; <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/application-advice/pre-application-advice/how-much-will-it>.*

*Requests for pre-application advice received since 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2017 and the council's response to them will be made public once a subsequent relevant planning application is made. We will be making all submitted documents, our response and any interim correspondence public. We will endeavour to ensure that all personal information such as telephone numbers and email addresses are removed from documentation.*

Yours sincerely,



Caitlin Phillpotts  
Planning Enquiry Officer

## APPLICATION WEB COMMENTS FORM

**Information available for public inspection and available on our website**

**Location :** The First Chapel at the Fairmile Cemetery Henley-on-Thames RG9 1AA

**Proposal :** Converting the First Chapel into a columbarium. Letter Only

**Application Reference :** P18/S0082/PEO - 2

Please complete

<b>Your name :</b>	Conservation Officer ( South )
<b>Your address :</b>	S.O.D.C.
<b>Date :</b>	13 February 2018

Use the space below for your comments

Conservation and Design

To: Caitlin Phillpotts From: Emily Karau

Date: 13 February 2018 Planning Reference: P18/S0082/PEO

Site: The First Chapel at the Fairmile Cemetery Henley-on-Thames RG9 1AA

Proposal: Converting the First Chapel into a columbarium

Relevant Legislation and Policy:

Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990: Section 66 and

72 NPPF: Section 12

Local Plan Policies: CON1-15

Description and Constraints:

The Non-Conformist Chapel subject of this enquiry is a C19 grade II listed building sited within a planned cemetery.

Comments:

It is important that historic buildings are kept in an active use consistent with their conservation. At the Fairmile Cemetery, the existing Non-Conformist Chapel has ceased to operate and it is now important that careful consideration is given to providing it with a useful and viable future which will enable and encourage its maintenance. Having considered the three options presented by West Waddy, it is my informal opinion that the options one and three for the columbarium (pet or human) would be most appropriate. This is because this use would require the least intervention into the building fabric and would be more consistent with the established purpose of commemoration and worship for which it was originally intended.

I assume that the niche cabinets would be free standing fittings and that any impacts upon fabric would be limited and reversible. There would be an impact upon the character of the interior and whilst an application should provide such a visual to demonstrate this impact, I consider that the benefits of a viable use are likely to outweigh any minor harm caused by these changes.

The option to convert the chapel to residential use is less desirable with the effects on the character and fabric of the building being far higher. I consider that the potential harm to the significance of the building is unlikely to be outweighed by sufficient public benefits to justify the works.

**Recommendation:**

If an application for listed building consent is made, all the internal alterations as well as details of a proposed extension should be informed by a Heritage Appraisal and Impact Assessment proportionate to the significance of the building and the proposed works as per Paragraph 128 of the NPPF.

These views represent my personal opinion and are not legally binding on the council in the subsequent determination of any formal planning application.

Emily Karau  
Conservation and Design Officer