

**To the Chair and Members of
the South East Area Committee**

4 July 2023

**Proposed Redevelopment/Repurposing of
St. Werburgh's Church, Werburgh Street**

St. Werburgh's was originally founded before 1179. The church that currently exists dates largely from the early eighteenth century. However, it was damaged by fire in 1754 and underwent significant renovation. The current building is one of the oldest surviving parish churches in Dublin and also one of the last Georgian churches still in use. The mid-eighteenth century interior is of particular note, having well-executed joinery in the pews and galleries, which are rare surviving examples of the period. The richly carved organ is a notable focal point, along with the exuberant pulpit by Richard Stewart, carved for the Chapel Royal before being transferred to St. John's, Fishamble Street, and then to St. Werburgh's in 1878.

The church is an architecturally and historically significant landmark building on Werburgh Street, along with the former parochial school to the south (now Christchurch Deanery) and the graveyard to the east. The church was associated with a number of significant figures, including Lord Edward Fitzgerald, leader of the United Irishmen, who is buried in the crypt.

The City Council was approached by the Dean of Christchurch Cathedral, who is responsible for St. Werburgh's, about the possibility of refurbishing the church and repurposing it as a tourist / culture / arts venue, opening it up to the public, while continuing to facilitate occasional religious services. It is proposed that the repurposed St. Werburgh's will operate as a destination for tourists and a venue for classical music concerts, small ensembles, solo artists, choirs, readings and similar performances.

There is a considerable shortage of music venues that can host choirs, small scale orchestras and chamber music events as well as a range of other musical offerings from traditional to contemporary in the city. The key to the sustainability of the building as a venue will be flexible and sensitive management that understands how to balance a tourist offer with the rehearsal / performance requirements of artists. The City Council is confident it can provide the required management through the Dublin City Council Culture Company.

The capacity of the venue will be circa 250. It will require some on-going revenue support from the City Council and / or the Arts Council and will have to generate income through charges / fees. The Arts Officer is satisfied that with appropriate management St. Werburgh's can make a significant contribution to Dublin's arts infrastructure.

In return for undertaking the proposed works and assuming responsibility for the on-going maintenance and management of the building it is proposed that the City Council, through the Dublin City Council Culture Company, will take full control of St. Werburgh's on a licence, with limited access being granted to Christchurch Cathedral for services, choir performances etc. 'free of charge'. (The City Council will be granted a 20 year licence at a nominal annual fee of €1, with an option to renew the licence, at its absolute discretion, for a further period of 20 years on similar terms).

The proposed works to be undertaken to the church building itself are modest, combining conservation of the historic fabric of the church, with minor alterations and modifications of the internal layout - changes which are designed, wherever practicable, to be reversible.

Minor works will be carried out inside the entrance from Werburgh Street, the floor of the nave will be repaired, and the interior will be repaired and redecorated, retaining its authentic historic character. The windows will be refurbished, with more extensive repairs undergone to the great east window. Internal secondary glazing will be installed to the windows on the north side to insulate adjacent housing from sounds emerging from the church. A new doorway will be constructed in the south wall of the church for fire escape purposes. Mechanical and electrical services will be renewed / upgraded including the installation of a mechanical extract ventilation system above ceiling level. Theatrical lighting and a sound system will also be installed. All of these are designed to minimise visual impacts on the historic interior.

New facilities to service the needs of both audience and performers will be located in the adapted former Sexton's House, and in a compact new building located on the site of a rear yard and a low quality 20th century extensions, all at the east end. A glazed link building, below the great east window, and facing out into the graveyard, will provide a new entrance and gathering space. (See sketch below).

Proposed structural interventions include, reinforcing the gallery balustrade, repairs to the aisle floor, reinforcing the roof structure, repairs and strengthening works to the chancel walls and east window, widening of door openings, strengthening of the gallery floor, underpinning work to foundations, repair and relaying of the entrance steps and railings and laying new separate foul and surface water drainage. All structural works are designed to minimise disturbance of the archaeology, be largely invisible, and to retain the integrity of the historic structure.

In order to provide access for the mobility impaired, a new accessible pedestrian route is proposed from Castle Steps, which link Castle Street and Little Ship Street, east of the Church. The ramp section of this route will pass over the existing graveyard. No below-ground foundations, or penetrations, are proposed for the ramp, thereby minimising damage to archaeology beneath. This route will serve as the primary access route / entrance to St. Werburgh's, with access via the Werburgh Street entrance being reserved for ceremonial occasions.

Part of the proposed new access route is on OPW land – see drawing below. This new pedestrian entrance will necessitate breaking through the historic wall on one side of Castle Steps. It is accepted that this will require careful consideration and justification, supported by historical analysis, heritage impact assessment, conservation methodology, etc. along with sensitive design and detailing, all of which will be part of the Part 8 planning documentation.

Works will also be carried out in the graveyard, as specified in the '***Draft Conservation Management Plan for St. Werburgh's Graveyard.***

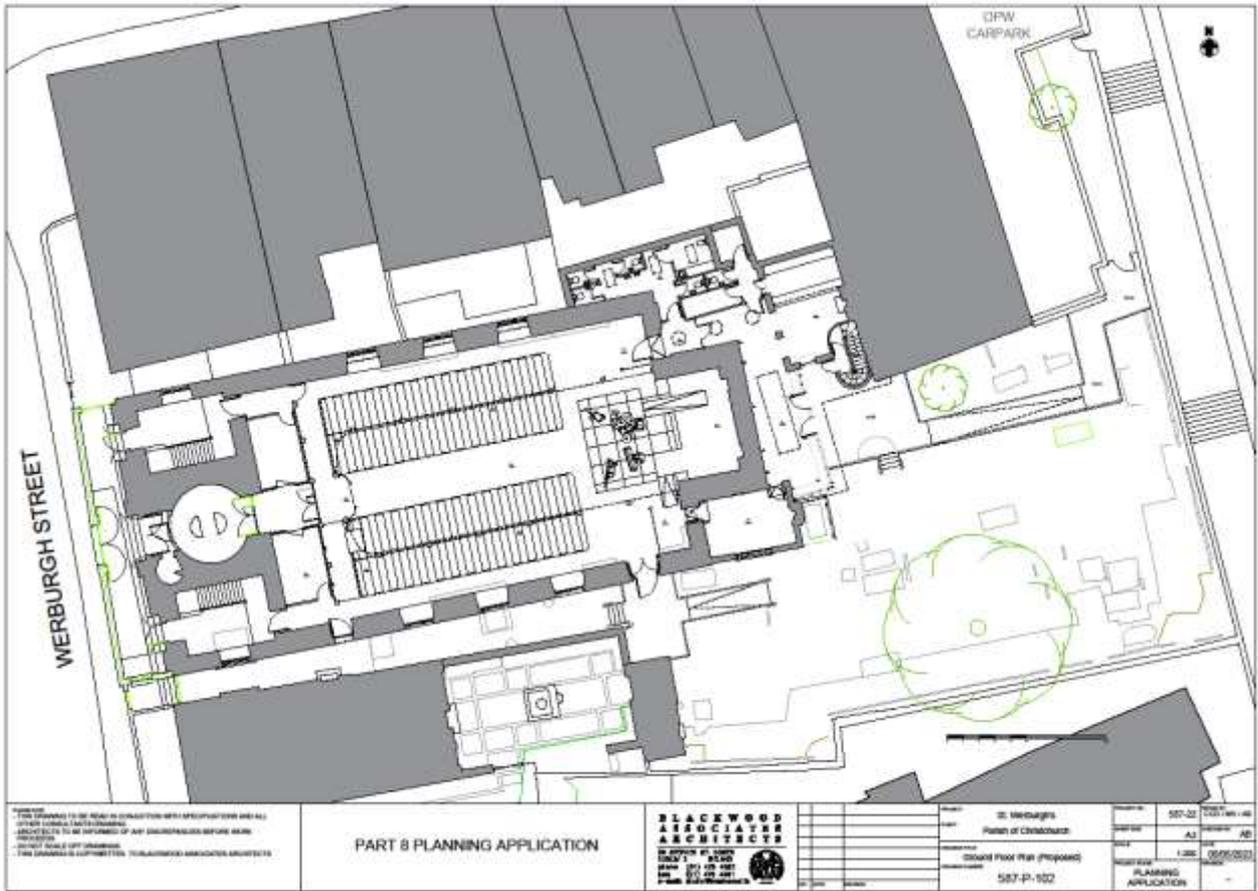
The estimated 'all in' cost of the proposed works is €5m. An application has been submitted to the Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for URFD funding as part of the current review of URDF Call 2 projects. (The City Council is satisfied that there is scope within the URDF allocation of €174m to part fund the St. Werburgh's project as a result of the de-committing of approx. €30m from other projects). It is intended that the balance of the required funding (c€1.25m) will be provided by the City Council.

Subject to the approval of the committee and the consent of the OPW for the new accessible pedestrian entrance route to traverse its land, it is proposed to initiate a Part 8 planning process in respect of the proposed development.

Owen P Keegan
Chief Executive



Proposed Extension



Proposed Access Route