

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF LIVERPOOL

Re St John the Evangelist Church Knotty Ash, Liverpool

JUDGMENT

1. Introduction: I am concerned with an unopposed faculty petition for some re-ordering at St John the Evangelist Church, Knotty Ash, Liverpool. The petition and proposed works have the unequivocal support of the DAC, the PCC and the congregation. This short judgment sets out the proposals and the reasons for my decision.
2. I have had the opportunity of considering a number of documents which have been uploaded to the Online Faculty System. These include the petition, statement of need, statement of significance, plans and various photographs as well as technical information about the proposed sound and screen systems. The appropriate notices have been given.
3. I had the opportunity to visit the church in the late afternoon 18th November where I met the petitioner Mr Donnelly and other church members. I wanted to visit to gain a better understanding of the works.
4. The Church: St John's is a Grade II listed building. It was built between 1834 and 1836. Knotty Ash is a suburb of Liverpool about 4 miles from the city centre. Since the church was built, a number of alterations have taken place. The most recent, about 10 years ago, involved the creation of an external ramp and substantial re-ordering of the west end to create a kitchen, café, meeting room and children's area. At that time, the font was relocated to the east end of the north aisle, and some isolated pews (none of which were original from when the church was built) were removed from the east and west ends of the nave to create a more flexible space.

5. There are some important historic features including Della Robbia ceramic memorial plaques at the west end and a stained-glass window by Morris and Co. in the north aisle. These remain untouched.
6. The interior of the church is largely original save for the alterations referred to in paragraph 4 above.
7. The proposed works and why it is said they are needed: The statement of need is entitled “Access for All” which clearly sets out the church’s mission to be a welcoming community for everyone. A number of activities take place during the week, and on a Sunday, there is a family worship and “café church” which is described as informal, creative and relaxed in the style of worship. This is then followed by a more traditional service. I was told that a number of young families attend with children. It is clear from the documents I have seen that the church regards children as a vital part of the church community and, as part of the mission of the church, they seek to be a loving, growing church and to extend that welcome to children with additional needs particularly neurodiverse, but also to enhance the accessibility and inclusion in the congregation who may have a disability.
8. The statement of need identifies that the church has undertaken extensive consultations and, the proposed works address the issues identified which include having better sound and visual systems, a safer children’s area and dedicated space for neurodiverse people.
9. The proposals are as follows:
 - a) creating a sensory space within the existing meeting room;
 - b) expanding the existing children’s area to the centre of the north aisle which will involve repositioning (but not removing) six smaller pews;
 - c) installing TV screens with the ability to have a live feed which will be on movable stands.
10. The statement of need and statement of significance identifies that the existing meeting room will be refurbished to create a new sensory space. This will involve special sensory lighting effects, padded mats and movable seating. Bench seating on wheels will be used to allow for the space to be used for meetings and other purposes. A TV screen and the opportunity for live feed provision and noise cancelling headsets will also be made available.

11. In respect of the children's area, there is already an existing children's space at the north-west corner. This will move to the centre of the north aisle. Smaller pews will be rearranged to form a partly enclosed children's area. Existing pews at both the east and west end of the north aisle will remain largely unchanged. The concept is twofold; firstly, it will be a safer more overlooked space where parents are better able to supervise young children, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it will bring the children into the heart of the worship space meaning that they are part of the service. The area will not be enclosed as this would not only send out a wrong message, but it would also impact the significance of the existing interior.

12. In respect of the proposed screens, the church currently uses a "roll up" type of screen which is difficult to view from certain parts of the church. New screens on movable stands will be visible for everyone and there is the ability to live feed.

13. The church has conducted a comprehensive consultation which revealed that a number of members of the congregation have identified a key barrier to participation in services including a significant number of reported difficulties with existing audio clarity, and difficulties in seeing the current "roll up" screen.

14. It is clear from the statement of need that the impact on the church's ability to better serve the needs of the community will be considerable, and the impact on the architecture of the interior is negligible.

15. The legal approach: if changes to a listed Church building are to be authorised by the grant of a faculty, a series of questions which were considered by the Court of arches in *Re St Alkmund, Duffield* [2013] Fam_158 have to be asked. Essentially, a) would the proposals, if implemented, result in harm to the significance of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest?; b) if the answer is "no" the ordinary presumption "in favour of things as they stand" is applicable and can be rebutted more or less readily depending upon the particular nature of the proposals; c) if the answer to (a) is "yes", how serious would the harm be?; d) how clear and convincing is the justification for carrying out the proposals?; e) bearing in mind that there is a strong presumption against proposals which will

adversely affect the special character of a listed building, will any resulting public benefit (including matters such as liturgical freedom, pastoral well-being, opportunities for mission, and putting the church to viable uses that are consistent with its role as a place of worship and mission) outweigh the harm? In answering this, the more serious the harm the greater will be the level of benefits needed before the proposals should be permitted.

16. If these questions above are addressed, there is a framework provided within which any harm caused by the building alterations may be assessed against the benefits which are achieved by those alterations. Essentially, this involves a balancing exercise.

17. Having had the opportunity of not only considering all the documents lodged, but also having had the benefit of visiting the church to get a “feel” for the works, I have little difficulty in coming to the conclusion that these proposals are not only worthwhile, but will further the mission of the church in making St John’s both accessible and inclusive. The aesthetic aspect of the proposed works are minimal. Existing fittings and furnishings such as the reredos, choir stalls, lectern and pulpit are not affected. All of the proposals are fully flexible and reversible. They are clearly required to enable the church to foster an inclusive environment for many years into the future.

18. Funding for the works is already available through an appropriate grant and existing giving. I therefore grant the faculty for the works.

District Judge Ian Knifton

Deputy Chancellor, Diocese of Liverpool

26th November 2025