

Statement in Support of the Current Planning Application
for a Modification to the Change of Use to the Existing Property at:
Unit 23-24 Cheriton, Queen's Crescent, NW5

Incorporating
Design and Access Statement
June, 2015

This application is for an existing community centre to continue as it is, but with the addition of prayers (to be held at specific times). No change is proposed to the existing permitted use or activities being held at the centre. Those who would be attending the prayers are from the same user group and families who already use the centre for other activities and most of those proposing to benefit from the prayer-specific use attend the centre at other times for other purposes, within the permitted Use.

There are no changes proposed to the layout of the interior or exterior of the property, other than the relocation of the basement office to the ground floor, in place of the ground floor w.c., which is moved to the basement in place of the office; this was carried out at the time that the centre took residence.

Background to this application:

The existing community centre serves the needs of local individuals and families and has been operating successfully to benefit those people for a significant number of years. It essentially serves a largely Muslim community but does have facilities and offer services to those outside that community. Furthermore, it is not limited to a specific Muslim community (as many such centres are) and provides facilities for women (which again, is not that common for broadly similar centres).

Not long after the centre opened, those attending asked to be allowed to pray to meet their obligations for their daily prayers, as there is no other such provision locally. Initially, only the lunch-time prayers were offered. However, the full five daily prayers have been held continuously for over three years now, until last month after the PCN was received.

A visit from an enforcement officer last year prompted a pre-apps submission relating to the use for prayer, alongside the existing and approved other uses. Prayer continued after a meeting between trustee(s) of the centre and a planning officer at the council's offices; it may be that the trustee(s) misunderstood the position as they thought that the officer indicated that there was no problem in continuing.

The pre-apps report was delivered earlier this year and the trustees looked around for someone to assist them with a formal planning application. Meetings were held in early May and in mid May it was agreed to proceed with the application. Whilst it was being prepared, the PCN was received. The council were not aware that we were preparing a planning

application. Prayers at the centre then stopped (including those which would normally be permitted as ancillary to the approved use, by those that would otherwise be at the premises anyway and not there specifically to pray).

During the briefing at the meeting to start the planning application, it was proposed that council officer(s) be approach prior to the formal submission of a planning application, so as to work with planners in preparing a suitable application. The council was informed of this after the issuing of the PCN.

That meeting, to which officers kindly agreed, was held at the council's officer on Tuesday, 16th June, 2015.

Pertinent Background to the Applicant Organisation:

This will not be elaborated on here in depth as we are supplying information describing the centre's activities and it is also well known to the neighbourhood, councillors and the council, as providing beneficial and charitable services to the locality.

Its activities are not to be changed, other than that prayers should be allowed as an ancillary service to the centre's other, main activities.

Apart from the services and facilities available within the centre, the trust sponsors and supports activities held away from the centre (including days out, sporting and other events) offering an extended diversity to those benefiting from its presence. They also provide home visits for those that need assistance, or bereavement counselling, for instance.

Their activities are both incidental to religious study and outside them, but all have a common thread in the pursuance of good morals and manners. Non religious activities and services such as health advice, teaching of languages, help with documentation and education, etc. are all supported in the same humanitarian and moral vein.

The centre is open to all, irrespective of religious belief, background or cultural origins. It encourages and supports inter-racial and inter-cultural activities and teaching. It specifically offers facilities to women that other centres of an otherwise superficially similar nature, do not. It is forward-thinking and promotes peace and respect for all, and between all. It teaches children tolerance and good manners as well as offering homework support to those who need extra-curriculum back-up.

The centre is run by a charitable trust of active trustees, supported by a committee of members, with volunteers and paid professional as appropriate. Those running classes and offering their services are vetted and registered as necessary and required by law.

The premises is located centrally to a catchment area from which its users and beneficiaries are drawn. Most of those using the centre live locally and most of the rest work locally. Daily activities draw only those for whom the centre is very accessible, especially as a very significant number of those activities are for children, or parents with children.

It might also be worth noting the the premises was in an appalling state of repair when it was taken over by the applicant group, who then spent considerable sums of money making the property fit for use.

Pertinent Considerationa Material to This Planning Application:

Much that is relevant here has been discussed above and, so avoid unnecessary repetition, will not be unduly reiterated here; we shall try to limit our comments to new material.

Consultations and Relations with Neighbours

We have extensively consulted local residents and businesses. As we have been in the parade for some years now, we and our activities are known to both local residents and businesses.

We understand that the concern that those who more recently complained was over the movement of people into and out of the building in the very early hours of the morning and late in the evening. Complaints were not about unreasonable or disruptive behaviour, nor the act of praying itself. This application resolves that problem as we are only looking for consent to pray within the hours of operation that the centre has an existing permission for.

We understand that the concern that those who had complained was the movement of people into and out of the building in the very early hours of the day and late in the evening. Complaints were not about unreasonable or disruptive behaviour, nor the act of praying itself. This application resolves that problem as we are only looking for consent to pray within the hours of operation that the centre has an permission for.

If there are any concerns relating to our activities, we shall do everything possible to immediately rectify the situation and maintain positive relations with our neighbours. We very much want and need their support in our work, and wish to offer them support and help if they need it. Our aims and intentions are to work positively with our neighbours and have good, mutually respectful relations with them all.

Although we have always been open to anyone visiting us if they have any concerns, we have never had anyone come to us with a complaint about our activities. In view of the reported complaint through the council, we realised that someone might feel uncomfortable coming to the centre to discuss their concerns, not realising that we are amenable to constructive criticism and would rather know if there was a problem so that we could deal with it. We would be unhappy to find that anyone might feel embarrassed to approach us. We have therefore visited neighbours and given contact details for them to use if they ever have any concerns - or even just wished to discuss anything with us. Hopefully this will make them less anxious and more open in expressing themselves.

We are also to have more 'meet your neighbour' events to allow those who do not use the

centre to see what we are achieving and allow neighbours to meet each other as well. This is consistent with our ethos of building communities and bringing harmony and friendship to all; we wish to encourage peaceful and constructive relationships within and between families, colleagues, neighbours and the wider community and society. We look to see the good in everything and realise that the complainant has indirectly helped us to see an opportunity to build closer relations with neighbours, in a way that we had not previously.

In approaching neighbours for this planning application, we found that there were a variety of views and reasons for them wishing to support us. They generally asked us to prepare a standardised form of letter for them to sign. We therefore prepared a number, each with different content, in accordance with the wishes of signatories. Supporters were asked to ensure that they agreed with the content before signing and were invited to add to, or delete, any of the content that they wished to. They were told only to sign if they agreed with what remained. They were each also advised that a planning officer may wish to verify their support and that they should only sign for what they genuinely felt. This meant spending a significant amount of time with each person but it was important for us to properly discuss the proposals with neighbours and to seek their advice and suggestions as well, and so receive only genuine and accurate support.

We are also raising a petition in support of the proposal and will divide this into two parts: one for those who intend to use the facilities and one for those who do not, but who support the proposals. It may be that there will be some duplication in those signing a petition and providing a letter, or other form of support. We are open to this possibility and do not wish it to seem contrived if there is any duplication, or have it seem that numbers of supporters are being inflated. We wish to have our support fairly presented and are content that any support by an individual that may be submitted in two or more forms, be taken to represent just that one individual's views.

Most of those wishing to pray at the centre are from nearby business and those on the parade itself, as well as local residents including those living the building within which the centre is located.

Our consultations were particularly focussed on properties in the immediate area. Encouragingly, we even had people interested in visiting our centre who had not done so previously. We may also find that one or more are interested in offering their time helping at the centre.

In our endeavour to consult as widely as possible we have also notified local councillors of our intention to submit this application. They are aware of our work and the services that we provide, and have been providing for so many years.

Operating Times, Occupancy Rates and Management

We are supplying a general timetable of current activities and numbers of those attending them (excluding prayers). Numbers of those attending the premises varies throughout the day and from day to day. There are times when different but concurrent activities are underway and at others just a single activity.

We are then also supplying one for the additional numbers that attend at times of prayer. It should be noted that those shown as attending for prayers will be the same as have already been doing so and who wish to do so should consent be granted. It is also relevant that many of those praying will already be at the centre at those times, participating in other activities.

In respect of number visiting to pray, the peak attendance will be on Fridays in the early afternoon (between 13:00 and 14:00 generally, the exact time varying over the year). This is coincidentally the least sensitive time as far as businesses and residential neighbours are concerned.

It is crucial to this application that the proposed use has been ongoing since the first year after the centre began to operate and that it has in effect, already been tested for suitability. *[Note concessions below being offered in this application which will moderate the continuation of that historic use.]*

It is also relevant that the numbers of those attending the centre for non-worship activities will not change. Furthermore, that those wishing to attend for worship will be those same people and numbers who have been doing so for three or more years; no change is proposed or anticipated. It is therefore considerably easier for officers to evaluate this proposal than if it were for an untried change in the use of the premises. Bearing in mind the additional concessions noted below, we hope that the use will be found appropriate and supportable.

Management procedures are already in place for the control of students attending at busier times and for certain prayers (the latter until the end of May this year when praying at the centre ceased). A more thorough and comprehensive management plan is being drafted and will be available for officers to comment on if a conditional approval is granted. Officers' views will be welcomed and taken into account in drafting the final version.

A monitoring and recording closed circuit television system has recently been installed, which also covers the entrance to the premises. This will not only assist the police should they ever need it for evidence relating to a crime not associated with the centre itself, but will be useful to planning officers in monitoring compliance with planning conditions. This will offer independent evidence should any complaint be received and will help to establish whether there be any substance any complaint. Recordings will be kept for at least thirty days, as normally preferred by police forces, and the system is capable of providing copies that could be taken off-site, to be used for instance, as police evidence in a prosecution.

Our understanding from the pre-apps report is that in planning terms, officers would need to be satisfied that movements to and from the premises were not disruptive or intrusive. It seems that this would be the main matter to assess and the cctv system would help to supervise that. However, as the early morning and late evening prayers are not included in this application, it is hoped that those concerns are overcome. To work with officers as well as neighbours, we shall keep all activities to times within those approved previously for the centre.

This means that this planning application, should it be supported by officers, would cause the centre to run at a lower level of usage than has been the case for the last few years. Considering the minimal level of objection that had been received over that time, officer may evaluate how much additional benefit may be gained from so reducing the hours, relative to the status quo of the past few years. We would hope that this concession be looked upon favourably and be beneficial to the success of this application.

If the centre's users find that longer hours than those agreed would benefit them and that it would be sufficiently important for them to extend those hours, they may of course make a further application in the future.

However, the applicant community/trustees are content to let planning approval be agreed for the current proposals and hours of operation, which will then initiate a period of use consistent with those conditions of approval. A period of time will then pass, during which the success of the implementation of that planning consent may be tested. Everyone is aware that this will then form the basis of any future application for extended hours; if that should ever be necessary.

Concerning those who had been praying at the centre and hope to do so in the future: the total number of those who prayed there does not reflect the numbers praying at the centre at any one time. For instance, those who work locally but live elsewhere would only attend lunch-time prayers whilst those living locally but working elsewhere would only attend at those times that they are at home. Furthermore, the time when most attend is for the Friday early afternoon prayers. Those who might not otherwise pray at other times, would normally attend those weekly Congregational prayers. For clarity, we are supplying a timetable indicating approximate average numbers who had been praying at the centre.

We were asked to supply information concerning other centre within a reasonable distance to enable officers to assess the need. A map showing this is to be submitted with this application. There is only one centre within a reasonable distance of the application site which is accessible to those who had used our premises. That premises is already over-subscribed and we understand that since we have been close for prayers they have been having difficulties trying to accommodate our members. They are turning people away due to lack of space, which is upsetting for them. Furthermore, they do not have any provision for female worshippers, which we did have, and would like to continue to offer.

Having to go elsewhere to pray also means that anyone attending our centre for other reasons, has to then go elsewhere to prayer and return to the centre to continue their other activities.

Layout and Accessibility

There are no proposed changes. This is particularly relevant as the centre has been supporting prayers for a number of years so the layout is already suited to that purpose, alongside its other activities.

On a technicality, an office that had been in the basement was moved to the ground floor, and toilet which had been on the ground floor had been relocated to the basement. This was done at the time that the centre was set up. Plans have been provided to reflect this.

Conclusion

Having had a period of several years to effectively test the use with complaints only relating to movements of people during early mornings and late evenings, and none of unreasonable or disrespectful behaviour, we feel that the proposed use has effectively proven its acceptability, especially within the terms of this application in reducing the hours to those already approved.

The numbers of people that will be using the premises and their distribution over the day and week, will be the same as those that have been doing so for the last several years (prior

to the end of May), including for prayer. No change in numbers is therefore proposed.

To enhance the attractiveness of the proposal, we are introducing a management plan that is more comprehensive and appropriate than that which we had in place previously.

Furthermore, and possibly of most interest to planners is that we are in this application, proposing to reduce the hours during which prayers may be held at the centre.

We have also installed cctv for officers to refer to should there be any concerns over the activities at the centre.

Overall, and considering the considerable level of support that we have for the centre and this planning application, we believe that the proposal is positive and will be beneficial all 'round.

Concluded: 28th June, 2015