



# Building project preparations

**TN117** Training Notes series: Administration

*These notes were first published on the website in August 2019 and last updated in August 2021. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.*

**These notes have been prepared for any church that is about to consider a building project. This might be a new £5 million church centre, a £500,000 extension or a £50,000 reordering of the chancel area.**

**Here are the key questions to ask *before* you choose an architect or start thinking about the details.**

The questions are posed as if for a new building. If you are extending or reordering your present site, you should ask the questions about both the specific change you are proposing, but also about the whole site.

---

## 12 key questions

### 1 **What is the precise need?**

This is a statement of what is lacking, or where you have problems, in your current building. Do not jump to solutions at this point. Spend time defining the problem and then state it in just a few words.

You may lack space for a growing congregation, or lack comfort with hard pews in a cold building. But these may simply be presenting problems. Try to work out what the *real* problem is: it might not be a building issue at all.

Then consider options. A better solution for a growing congregation might be to church plant. To solve a lack of comfort you might instead hire a local centre. You will need to show that the cost (in every sense) of building is justified.

## 2 **Who are we seeking to serve?**

Your default thinking will be yourselves. Think again. Who do you want to benefit from this project? You need to see things from their perspectives, not from yours. The answer might be *future* members of your church or your local community, it might not be you at all. If so, what *you* want hardly matters!

But above all else, is God at the centre of everything? Who owns this project? If you see yourselves at the heart, you could be just about to launch into a costly disaster.

## 3 **How committed are we to praying for the vision?**

The church's leadership clearly needs to be passionate about the idea, even if the details are far from clear. This probably means there are groups of people praying for the project and Sunday sermons are teaching around the concept. The vision should of course be centred on your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ with prayer at its heart.

But the vision must not be a completed building project for buildings are only means to ends. Your prayer should be how the building enables your mission to the world. Try mocking up what your church website might include once the vision is realised, five or ten years from now.

## 4 **What spaces do we need?**

The key point about any building project is not the detail of décor or design but the spaces the building will provide you with. What activities do you need to provide spaces for? How many people doing what in each space?

So a coffee shop will need spaces for a kitchen, a comfortable area for sitting in, loos, storage, linkage to the church. A new church centre may need spaces for various types of young people's groups, for gathering and refreshments, for an open plan office for all the staff to work from.

## 5 **What do we want this building to say?**

Every building communicates a message – so what do you want yours to say (a) when people see it from the road, (b) when people are inside it? How will it feel to its users? The process of deciding on this will prove to be a key learning point.

The new church centre may need to give a message of life, growth and colour, or of peace and stillness. It may need to shout out its existence, or you may want it to fit quietly into its surroundings. One church building can communicate 'God is other', whereas another may say 'Emmanuel – God is with us'. They will be very different buildings even if the spaces are identical.

## 6 **How flexible do we want to be for how long?**

If you are investing a large sum of money into a fixed building, you need to have some idea of its expected life. If you plan for group sizes that exist today, the position might be very different in only five years' time. If you are growing you may need a building constructed in such a way that it can easily be reconfigured, expanded – or sold.

If you are providing spaces for children's work, you may need small areas you can combine or close off from each other to cater for different-sized groups, now or in the future. Consider what would be your ideal – and then how far you would be prepared to compromise if costs or other factors forced you to cut back.

## 7 **What might be people's reactions?**

Here you need to list various stakeholders and consider both their immediate and eventual responses. Examples include your present congregation, your occasional visitors, other users, the local community, national or local protest/heritage groups.

If you plan to alter a historic building, there may be opposition. Plan a careful consultation process with all users and the local community. But the majority of your congregation may have initial reservations too. What kind of change management process might be needed to win most people over?

## 8 **What about practical issues?**

An architect may want to know your first idea of budget. What kind of time-scale do you have in mind (it will probably work out much longer...)? What kind of permissions and by whom are you going to need (see supplementary list below)? Think carefully about making your new building eco-friendly and what this might mean in practice (Training Notes TN122, *Your eco-church check-up*, covers this point).

It is also worth undertaking some proper research: the history of your church building, its last upgrade, the actual date of the pews, why the building is the shape it is.

## 9 **Which other churches should we visit?**

Checking out examples from other churches should provide creative ideas. When you come to choose an architect you will want to see some of their work but for now it is more getting an idea of concepts that matters. Don't try to copy but take inspiration and practical ideas from what you see.

If you plan to turn your church seating round by 90 degrees or run a pre-school in a reordered hall, go and look at examples. Talk to leaders in these churches, check out the problems they had to overcome: construction, management, running costs.

## 10 **What staffing and maintenance will be required?**

Consider the extra costs and staffing for cleaning, caretaking and, after the first few years, maintenance. Heating and lighting costs could increase sharply with the new facility. The new kitchen will be great, but who will need training in how to use it? Do you need a proper business plan for the coffee shop? The centre may need a Manager and volunteer welcomers: do you have those people available?

Also, have you someone in your congregation who can manage this project on your behalf? This could be a major task.

## 11 **How shall we fund it?**

For most church projects, almost all the amount will need to be raised from direct giving. In broad outline, how do you intend to go about this?

If, instead, you have a building or land to sell, you need to check out the long-term wisdom of this action. If you have reserves, is it right to deplete them by allocating them to this project?

You also need to consider whether you are happy to seek and receive Heritage and Lottery Funding and whether there are any local trusts you might approach. For any grant applications or community funding, look out now for the boxes you have to tick; some might compromise your church's beliefs.

## 12 What early advice do we need?

First, investigate what is available in print. CofE churches should find that their Diocesan Advisory Committee has detailed sheets available. Church insurers should have helpful advice.

Then go for personal help from independent sources. It is better to consult with your DAC (if that applies) very early in your thinking rather than waiting until you are obliged to do so. Denominational or other external advisers can spur you on to better thinking even if they seem less than enthusiastic about your specific plans.

Be wary of advice offered from church members. If you have a professional architect in membership, their help can be a bonus. But they are not independent.

### Additional questions: architects

*You are not just looking for competence in church building design, but in forging a relationship which will last throughout the project and beyond. It goes without saying that you will make this decision a matter for prayer.*

- 1 Who can help us choose a short-list of suitable architects and how much can we trust these advisers? What are our criteria for the choice?
- 2 What is each architect's main line of business, how much experience does each one have of church buildings (and listed buildings if relevant)? How long has the firm been in business and how big are they?
- 3 Does it matter whether the architect is a Christian or not? How well will they understand our worship style, community needs, budgetary constraints, faith basis? What should we consider if our inspecting architect (under the Inspection of Churches Measure) should want to be considered as the new build architect?
- 4 Are they happy for us to go and see some of their projects that are similar to our ideas – and talk to the users? Did any exceed budget? Did any problems arise during construction or afterwards?
- 5 Whom would we deal with, and what kind of relationship might we expect to have with them? How impressed are we with their initial questions to us?
- 6 What process would they work to for these initial stages, and what are their requirements for fees? What initial work are they prepared to do without charge?

### Additional questions: permissions

*Most of this will be handled for you, and later, by your architect or advisers, and points are only given very briefly in what follows. But you need to be aware of the likely issues.*

- 1 What planning consent will we need from the local authority or the necessary faculties (CofE buildings)? Do we know our obligations to consult English Heritage, and follow correct conservation area procedures if relevant?

- 2 For listed buildings are we aware of the need for Listed Building Consent (even if an 'exempt denomination' because exemption will not always be total)? For CofE churches are we asking help from our DAC to advise us on working through the Diocesan Consistory Court? For Methodist, URC and Baptist Union churches, are we aware of the need to consult our respective Listed Building Advisory Committee?
- 3 How can we prepare the strongest case to justify the change we are proposing? How will we list benefits such as the church's service to the local community, providing facilities for others to use, enhancing a historic building for future generations, and being more eco-friendly? How can we show that we are aiming to minimise visual disruption and disturbance for neighbouring properties?
- 4 What other statutory and related issues might arise over our proposals? (Matters to consider include disability discrimination, fire regulations and car parking availability.) Which 'amenity societies' do we need to deal with? (Consider: English Heritage, Victorian Society, the Georgian Group, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.)
- 5 What do we need to do, and when, regarding a 'Statement of needs' and a 'Statement of significance'? The latter covers the historic and artistic significance of the building and its contents.
- 6 Are we aware of the make-up of the eventual team to run the project? (This needs to include Architect, Quantity Surveyor, Construction (Design & Management) Co-ordinator, Structural Engineer, Services Engineer, Building Inspector and Builder. Also, possibly, advisers for acoustics, lighting, kitchen and audio-visuals.)

### Two websites to check out

ChurchCare: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare>

Church Building Projects: <https://www.churchbuildingprojects.co.uk/>

Plus sites for your relevant denominational advisers.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN117. This item was originally written for the magazine, *Maintenance and Equipment News*.

See also Article A16, *Funding a capital project*, and Training Notes TN44, *The message of your buildings*, and TN122, *Your eco-church check-up*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training or consultancy around the use of thinking out new build projects.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN117 under Administration.

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176 Email: [john@john-truscott.co.uk](mailto:john@john-truscott.co.uk) Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>