

Chilton Town Council on behalf of residents of the Parish of Chilton: Representation against the proposal of the termination of plurality and closure for regular worship of the Church of St Aidan, Chilton under the Pastoral Church Building's Scheme.

Date: 5th July 2026

Following public consultation Chilton Town Council is writing on behalf of our residents, to formally object to the draft Pastoral Church Building Scheme proposing the closure of St Aidan's Church, Eden Terrace, Chilton DL17 0EJ, and the subsequent termination of its plurality.

While we acknowledge the financial and organisational pressures faced by The Parochial Parish Council (PCC) we urge the Mission Pastoral Committee to reject the scheme on the basis that the closure of the church creates an unacceptable level of community loss and irreversibly damages the social and historical heritage of our town, impacting on a project to enhance community cohesion and support economic development within the town through heritage tourism. The Church has been recently listed alongside the Chilton Miners Welfare Recreation Ground Pavilion Park as one of Durham's Non-Designated Heritage Assets (NDHA).

In addition, residents raised concerns at a public meeting (held on the 18th June 2026) relating to the commitment of the Diocese to look at alternative options to continue worship and, although not a criticism of the individual minister, there is evidence that in other instances parishes have felt that the decision to put in place an Interim Change Minister, as opposed to permanent minister signalled a forgone conclusion to manage decline rather than an opportunity to grow and expand the ministry. This perhaps signalling to the PCC that the Diocese already viewed the church as functionally unsustainable and the Interim Priest in Charge was brought in to help the congregation accept the closure rather than work towards finding viable solutions to support keeping the building open, identify potential partnerships and grow the congregation.

As a result, although the Change Minister formally abstained from the February 2025 vote to project local autonomy, the PCC reluctantly felt that they had no other option than to vote to request the Church be closed for worship.

On this basis we wish to provide the evidence below on the importance to the Chilton community of retaining St Aidan's as a centre for worship and community life and request that we are given time to work with the Durham Diocese and the PCC to develop a long-term sustainable plan.

Ecclesiastic and civic asset:

Public consultation highlighted the significant concern from residents at the spiritual and ecclesiastical loss this closure represents to the Chilton Community. St Aidan's has been the centre of worship, spiritual support, baptisms, weddings and funerals for a century.

It is the focal point for Remembrance Sunday bringing together faith and secular/civic life and a place for celebrations during festive periods.

Arguments have been made this is not sufficient to maintain the church operation and it is only sustainable by growing regular worship. However research, including the Church of England Pastoral Measure Review, and reports “from *Anecdote to Evidence*” and “*Going Deeper*” found that merging multiple parishes frequently accelerates the decline in attendance, financial giving and reduced local engagement leading to further disadvantage in areas of social deprivation. We would therefore stress that exploring options to retain local worship not only benefit the community but is vital to the future sustainability of the Church of England.

Heritage Asset:

St Aidan’s Church is considered by residents as an historical anchor building for the community it has served since 1904.

The original St Aidan’s Church building was a corrugated iron structure designed as a temporary “tin church” to serve the growing mining communities of Chilton and Windlestone. The community began to fundraise for a new modern church in 1926 and were delighted to receive a donation of £1000 from Lord Eldon (John Scott) the owner of Chilton Colliery, just before he died in August of that year.

It was fitting that in 1927 the community chose the Church as the location of the War Memorial to 110 men of Chilton and Windlestone who were killed in WW1. This included Sam Hartnell, the schoolboy international footballer, who played for Chilton builders, Bishop Auckland teams and professionally for Sunderland and was sadly killed in action on August 8th, 1918, aged 21 years. The full list of names is held in the memorial records of the Church.

On the 12th March 1928 fire broke out due a faulty electrical wire, emergency services were unable to get to the site due to severe snowstorms, members of the community braved the flames to rescue the war memorial and other items, but the original church building burnt to the ground.

Reverend Lancelot Wilkinson, the priest in charge at the time, vowed to build a new a bigger Church. Within three months a new church hall was built to the south of the original building as a temporary site to hold services. The first sod of the new church was cut by Rev. T Lomax with the foundation stone laid in July 1927 by the Bishop of Durham.

The Church was then consecrated by Rev H Henderson Bishop of Durham on the 10th May 1930 and has serviced the spiritual needs of the community to this day – including at key point in their lives with baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals and civic services.

Chilton residents of all ages have consistently identified protecting the town’s heritage as a key priority. For example: in the place-based consultation as part of developing a neighbourhood plan 96% of respondents said it was very important and the remaining

4% somewhat important. The buildings and spaces identified as heritage value included St Aidan's Church, the Pavilion and Miner's Welfare Recreation Ground.

The Church Building is an integral part of the history and story of Chilton and forms a key location on the developing Heritage Trail funded as part of the Heritage Lottery funded project Chilton: Our People, Our Place, Our Heritage. A project that links Chilton to the Durham Heritage Tourism Triangle, providing opportunities for inward investment and economic growth, reinvigorating the high-street and providing jobs and volunteering opportunities for local residents

General Description and Condition of the Church (taken from the 2023 Quinquennial Conditions Report)

The Church has north and south entrance porches providing access to a baptistery at the west end of the Nave, The Central Nave is flanked by plain arched colonnades providing access to north and south side aisles. At the east of the Nave is a semi-circular arch to the Chancel. The organ is located within an arched opening in the south wall to Chancel.

Walls are generally of coursed sandstone with plain ashlar stone windows and door surrounds, and entrance porches have ashlar stone parapets. The roof is covered with green slate (possibly Norwegian) laid in even courses; gable walls are weathered with sandstone water tabling.

The Church structure is basically sound but would benefit from roof repairs and gutter maintenance to prevent water ingress, internally it would be beneficial to undertake some plaster repairs and redecoration when funds permit.

Proposal to develop a joint strategy for St Aidan's as Hybrid Civic/ Worship Asset

To establish a tripartite group; the Durham Diocese, PCC and Chilton Town Council (which brings with it expertise from the Miners Welfare Recreation Ground Charity Trust), to combine expertise to co-create a sustainable, long term development plan with the aim of securing the future of St Aidan's Church as a dedicated places of worship, civic ceremonies, community events and activities – a community hub.

We would also seek expert advice from The Church, DCC's Planning Department Conservation team and other community interest groups.

Key objectives will include:

- Reviewing and updating the previous architectural plans to spatially redesign the building for multi-purpose usage.
- Develop a 5-year business and financial sustainability model
- Identify potential grant funding

- Link to heritage tourism plan for Chilton aligned to the Miners Welfare Recreation Ground project: Chilton: Our People, Our Place, Our Heritage.
- Agree a shared governance structure detailing management and operational responsibilities.

We would aim to present the draft proposal to the Bishop and Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee and The Church Commissioners for England January 2027.

Cllr Sue Reece

Chair of Chilton Town Council

Chair of Miners' Welfare Recreation Ground Charity Trust

(Notes from the public meeting of the 18th June and copies of resident's comments are submitted with this representation).