

**DIOCESE OF SHEFFIELD
In the Consistory Court**

Her Honour Judge Sarah Singleton QC
Chancellor

**In the Matter of
CHRISTCHURCH DORE
TEMPORARY MINOR REORDERING**

Judgment

Concerning the Petition of the Incumbent and Churchwardens of Christchurch Dore to continue the removal of two rows of pews from the north side of the nave to create a children's area

1. The works subject to this petition are the removal of 2 rows of pews on the north side of the nave to create a children's area. Christchurch Dore is a Grade II listed, post medieval church. The Archdeacon, the Venerable Malcolm Chamberlain, granted a temporary licence for these works on 20th September 2018 on condition that the pews removed were to be retained safe and dry. I understand that they are now kept in the vicarage garage and I trust that the Archdeacon's conditions continue to be met. I note that in addition to the removal of pews the permission included the reversing of a third row of pews so as to create a children's area with the reversed pew to enable supervising adults to face the children in the children's area. I have seen a plan of the church as it is laid out at present and note that the location of the removed pews is approximately one third of the way into the nave from the back of the church on the north side.
2. The Archdeacon's temporary permission expired on 19 December 2019. The Petitioners are preparing a further petition in consultation with the DAC and the relevant historical amenity societies for a wholesale re-ordering which is likely to include the removal of all the pews in the nave. Nothing in this judgment is intended to pre-judge that application. At their meeting of 11th of December 2019 the DAC recommended these works for approval. The required public notices were displayed inside and outside the church between 21st of December 2019 and 20th of January 2020 and three letters of objection were received at the Registry.

3. On 9th of January 2020 the Registrar received a letter from Ms Hilary Harrison who is a weekly communicant at the church of some longstanding. She writes that the pews had been removed two years ago and she had not previously had an opportunity to object. She considers the children's area is an eyesore and out of keeping with the rest of the space. She suggested the children's area reduces the seating available at large events. She says this:-

I understand the church needs to encourage families to bring their children to church and for those children to want to come however, I feel that if we have to have this, the siting in Dore Church should be less obtrusive. Possibly at the back on the right of the nave.

4. The Registrar received a letter from Ms Pamela Butterworth dated 15th January 2020. She also suggests the children's area would be better at the rear of the church on the right-hand side. She says that she has observed that the children at the services do not pay any attention to the worship being distracted by the activities provided. She suggests that the area is very dominant within the congregation and that its position is inappropriate.
5. Finally the Registrar received a letter from Mrs Judith Jackson, MBE, of 17th January 2020. She suggests that the removal of the pews has divided the congregation and is intrusive for members of the congregation who sit behind the children's area. She says it obstructs the view of the front of the church and distracts attention from the church service. She has no objections to there being a children's area in a different position and also suggests the rear of the church on the right-hand side.
6. Each of the three correspondents was invited by the Registrar to become a Party Opponent to the Petition. Each declined and was content for her objections as expressed in her letter to be taken into account in my decision making.
7. The response of the Petitioners to the objections set out in the letters summarised in the previous paragraphs is contained in the letter of Mr Richard Knights, churchwarden and Petitioner, dated 26th February 2020. In summary his responses are as follows:
 - a. The location of the removed pews for the children's area was selected for practical reasons. The locations suggested by the objectors would have required the

relocation either of the audio-visual desk or the font which would have been both impractical and unsafe for children and wheelchair users.

- b. Furthermore, he says, it was a deliberate and theologically based choice for children's area to be centrally placed in the church and for children to be welcomed there. He points out the children's area has generally been a popular success and has played a significant role in attracting the attendance of families with younger children to the 10 am all age service. Later in his letter he points out that it has been a main emphasis of this church's mission to rejuvenate through growing the numbers of families with young children who attend.
 - c. Finally, he says that it is rare for there to be more than 100 attenders at a wedding at the church and that the seating capacity is 158 in forward facing seats with the children's area in place. It is also possible when a fuller attendance is expected to put temporary seating into the children's area to increase that capacity.
8. I have read and taken into account the objections raised by Ms Harrison, Ms Butterworth and Mrs Jackson. However, for the reasons set out in the response of Mr Knights I do approve these works. I take into account in particular the fact that the creation of the children's area has been otherwise popular and successful in attracting younger families to the relevant services. Change can be discomfoting for those who have been comfortable with things as they are and I hope and expect that the Petitioners will actively consult with the regular attenders old and new about the major reordering project which is being advanced.
9. This approval is effective until the anticipated petition for the full reordering proposed is finally determined when the greater project, if allowed, will absorb this minor re-ordering. My intention is that I can decide at that point whether this permission is to continue as part of the major reordering or should stand alone to be permitted permanently or should be reversed. It is therefore a condition of this permission that the removed pews continue to be safely stored.

Sarah L Singleton QC

Chancellor of the Diocese of Sheffield

10th April 2020