

Cambridge Unitarians 第一

Buildings update

26-07-2026

Previously...

- At our last meeting in January, we were awaiting the outcome of our planning application, which included the following components:
 - Refurbishment of the church (roof tile and window replacement, solar panels).
 - Replacement of the manse roof.
 - Change of use for the manse: from Class C3(a) [residential] to Class F1(f) [public worship].
 - Change of use for the hall: from Class F1(f) [public worship] to Class E(g)(i) [offices].

Previously...

- If approved, this planning application would allow us to:
 - **Sell the hall** with planning permission in place for use as office space:
 - Selling with planning permission in place would hopefully attract a higher price.
 - The buyer would hold planning permission to demolish the toilets and ancillary buildings – if they wanted to – again, making the site more desirable to purchase.
 - **Put the proceeds from the hall sale towards refurbishing the church and manse:**
 - Refurbished church could be used all year round, with improved spaces / facilities.
 - Refurbished and reconfigured manse would provide kitchen, toilet and office facilities, connected directly to the church.
 - Potential for new types of hiring income, e.g. meeting rooms.

Previously...

- In January, we presented four options for how we might move forward:
 - **Scenario 1:** plans as submitted to Cambridge City Council (**medium financial risk**).
 - **Scenario 2:** use existing funds to restore all existing buildings in current configuration (**very high financial risk**).
 - **Scenario 3:** sell the manse and put the proceeds towards restoring the church and hall (**high financial risk**).
 - **Scenario 4:** sell all buildings, and either rent out a school hall for services, or buy a house in central Cambridge (**low financial risk**).
- The congregation indicated a strong preference to retain our church building.
- Over the past 6 months, we have continued to pursue scenario 1, which allows us to keep our church while minimising financial risk.

Planning application results

- **Unfortunately, our plans have now been rejected by the council - twice.**
- After the initial (formal) rejection, we revised the plans to overcome the council's objections wherever possible, and prepared additional argumentation to support our position.
- We then used the pre-application system, with the support of a specialist planning consultant. This explores feasibility with the council in a more informal/collaborative way, which we hoped would increase our chances of success.
- The verdict of the pre-application process, however, was that the council would still reject our revised plans if we were to proceed to a full application at this time.

Cambridge City Council's objections

1. **Loss of community facility *via* change in use of the hall to office space**

We provided evidence that our hiring income has been declining, that our existing spaces are barely utilised, and that all current community uses could be accommodated in our newly-refurbished facilities, but this did not satisfy the council.

2. **Loss of residential facility *via* change in use of the manse**

We argued that the manse has been used exclusively by the church since the 1920s and so has been unavailable for rent/purchase on the open market for more than a century. We also pointed out that it is currently uninhabitable and might require £300+ k of repairs to become habitable, but again the council was unmoved.

3. **Overdevelopment of the site**

Despite its low architectural value, the council is insisting the common room be retained. This negatively impacts the desirability of the hall site for potential purchasers.

Can we overcome these objections?

- Of the council's three objections, only one has a clear pathway to resolution:
 1. **Loss of community facility *via* change in use of the hall to office space**
 - **The council will only be satisfied that the hall is surplus to requirements if we list it for sale – *for use as a community facility only* – for 6-12 months and receive no interest.**
 - This therefore introduces a further delay of 6-12 months before we can reapply for planning permission. Meanwhile, our buildings continue to degrade...
 - We have been quoted £11-12 k + VAT by an estate agent to provide this service.
- **There is no clear pathway to resolution for the other two objections.** We have already submitted our strongest argumentation on these points, and it has not been accepted.
- We could request an alternative case officer next time, however a vastly different outcome is unlikely as the final decision was signed off by the leader of the planning team.

Other issues

- **Bat survey:** the council requires a full bat survey to be carried out. Bat surveys are seasonal and can only be done during a short time window, which we have already missed for 2026. We would therefore need to wait until at least spring 2027. Once carried out, this bat survey would be valid only for a short period of time (1-2 years).
- **Energy and morale of volunteers:** with at least another 12-18 months of this planning battle on the horizon, and potentially a large building project to follow, do we - as a small community - have the capacity/energy required to push this project to completion?
- **Financial position:** the extra delays introduced by the planning process affect our financial projections (see following slides), as do the additional expenses incurred/expected.

The financial picture

- We have updated our financial model based on our position at the end of 2025, additional expenses, and the extra delays introduced by the planning process.
- We would suggest that there are now only three (potentially) viable ways forward:
 - **Scenario 1:** plans resubmitted, with all council objections (somehow) overcome
 - **Scenario 4:** sell all buildings, and either rent a school hall or buy a house
 - **Scenario 5:** sell the hall and manse without planning permission and put the proceeds into refurbishing the church, including basic kitchen / toilet facilities (e.g. by the entrance)
- **VERY IMPORTANT: We are not making any decisions today!** We are simply providing an update on our latest position and getting your initial feedback on the options above.
- We plan to reconvene in September for further discussions with the congregation – hopefully with additional information in hand (e.g. an up-to-date valuation for each of our buildings).

New

A note on our financial modelling

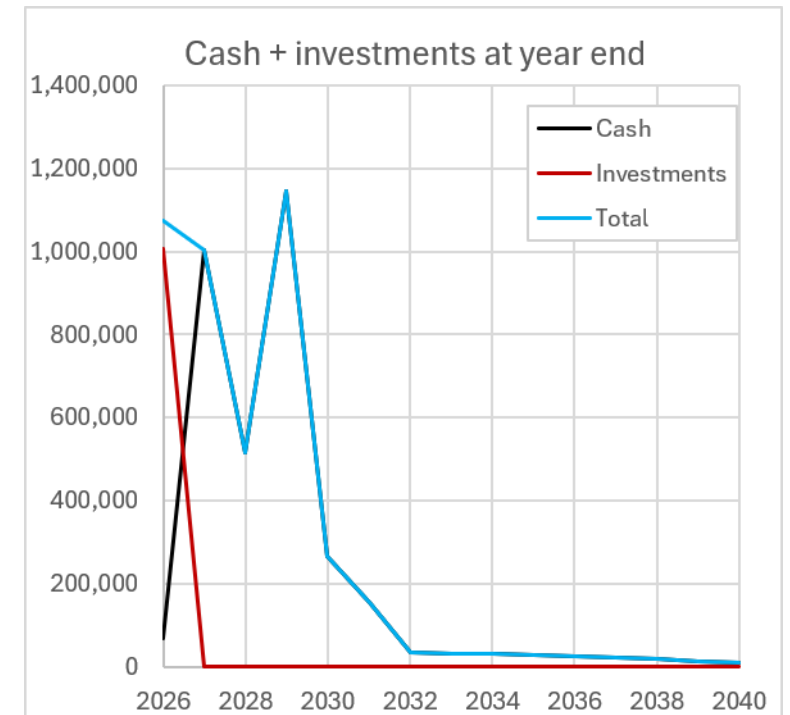
- As shown in January, we have developed our own financial model, which is used on the following slides to give a view on the **relative financial risks** of each scenario.
- There is a **lot** of uncertainty in the model inputs, so please treat with extreme caution the absolute values that come out of the model!
- We are working on firming up the inputs behind these projections as best we can.

Scenario 1

Plans resubmitted, with all council objections (somehow) overcome.

To consider:

- As a result of delays and additional expenditure, the financial risk associated with this scenario looks higher than it did 6 months ago. It is now more likely that external funding would be required to support this project.
- This scenario still requires us to obtain planning permission. How would we overcome the two council objections that have no clear pathway to resolution?
- Do we want to continue incurring costs in pursuit of this?



Relative financial risk: High

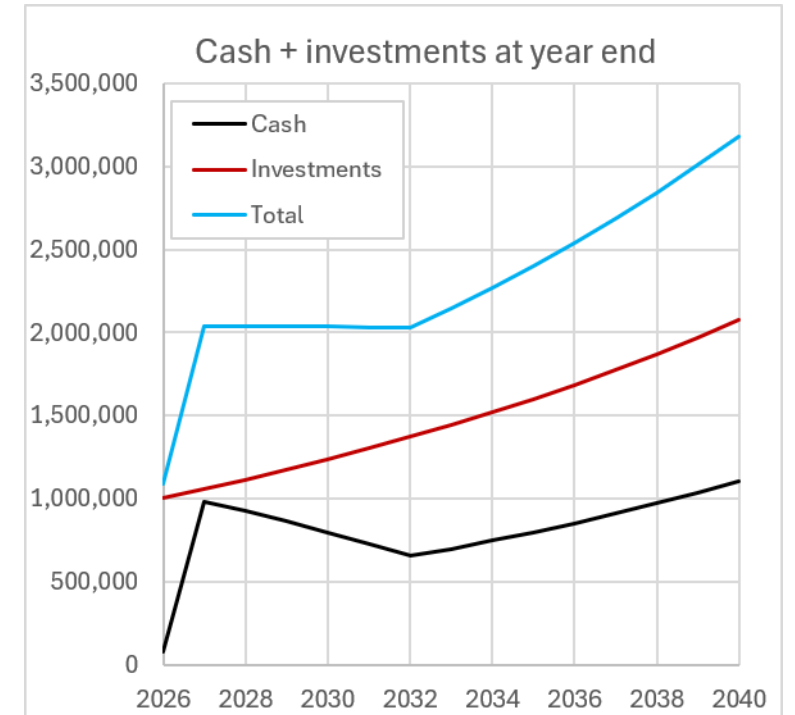
External funding possibly required.
Sale price of hall and precise scope of refurbishment will be key

Scenario 4 (house variant)

Sell all buildings, and either rent a school hall (not shown here) or buy a house (shown here).

To consider:

- Given the council's concerns about loss of the manse as a residential dwelling, would we be permitted to convert a different house to a place of worship? Possibly we would need to move out of the city centre to do so?
- What else could we achieve with the additional money this scenario would give us? E.g. ministerial support after Andrew Brown's retirement?



Relative financial risk: Low

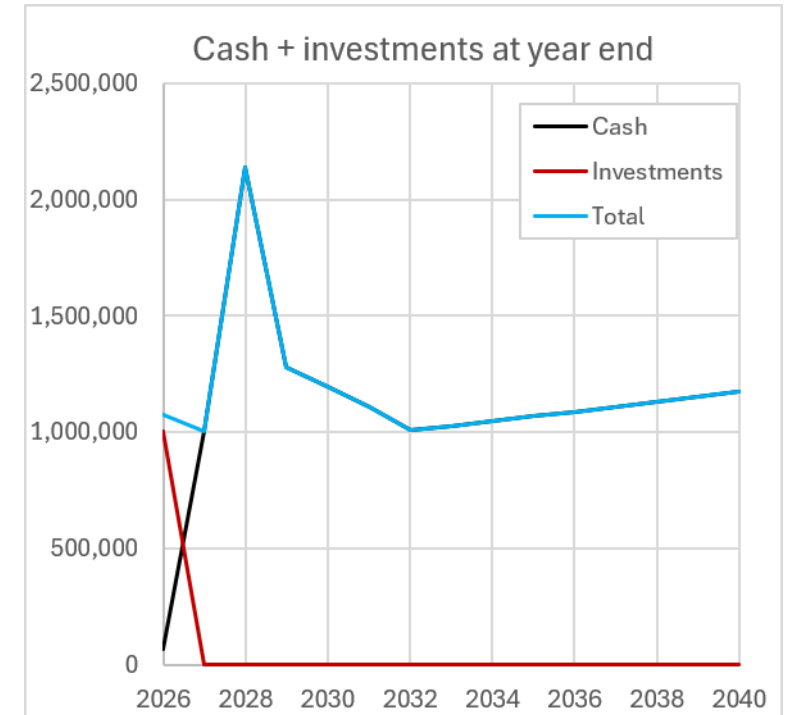
Investing proceeds of sale could give us a recurring income to finance other initiatives.

Scenario 5

Sell the hall and manse without planning permission; keep the church and refurbish it to include basic kitchen + toilets.

To consider:

- This option would allow us to keep our church – which we previously identified as being important to us – without needing to overcome the council's objections.
- It would leave us with more restricted facilities than scenario 1 (although also less to manage, longer-term).



Relative financial risk: Medium

Significant unknowns (e.g. sale price without planning permission), but might leave us with some spare funds

Discussion

- What are your thoughts on the options presented today?
- Are there any other options we could consider?
- How best might we go forward, considering both our finances and volunteer time/energy?