

Deputation of Canon Tom Kennar, Rector of St Faith's Church, Havant.

Wednesday 27th February 2019

Mr Mayor and Council-members,

Thank you for this opportunity to make a short deputation to you. I'm here because of a decision made by the Cabinet, which I would like to persuade you to over-turn.

St Faith's applied for funding to the Neighbourhood portion of the Community Infrastructure Levy fund. We are seeking funding to upgrade the facilities of St Faith's Church, to make it more accessible to the whole community, including by the provision of a wheelchair-accessible toilet, and automatic entry doors.

St Faith's has a long history of being the Civic Church of the Borough. We are the home of war memorials of the last 300 years. We are the final resting place of the Lords of Havant and Staunton over many centuries. Every year, we make ourselves available to the Borough Council for its Civic Remembrance Services.

I was therefore very surprised to hear that our bid for 25% of the anticipated costs was rejected by the Cabinet on the grounds that we are a 'religious organisation'. My surprise was all the greater because none of the supporting papers for the Bid process included any such exclusions.

But whilst I might seek to persuade you to over-turn the Cabinet's decision on such a technicality, I want to argue that there is a much more fundamental issue at stake here. Specifically, I want to challenge any policy to blanket-exclude religious organisations from applying for Council funds.

First, in our specific case, I would argue that St Faith's, is both the home of a religious congregation, but it is also a parish church – which has a particular statutory and legal role. A parish church is bound by Law to be available to every citizen of its parish. *Any* citizen of the parish has the right to be married at St Faith's – regardless of their faith - or to have their funeral held there. Furthermore, *any* citizen of the parish – whatever their faith - has the legal right to vote for the annual election of Churchwardens. It might also interest you to know that we are bound – by law – to hold services of public worship in the building, whether we want to or not!

We are, therefore, much more than a 'religious organisation' – we are the provider of a statutory service, bound by the laws of the land, just like the Council. That is a responsibility which we have taken on even more seriously in recent years, with substantial physical improvements to the building, none of which have very much at all to do with us being a place to worship, and everything to do with being the custodians of a very beautiful and locally-important pile of bricks.

Secondly, on a more general note, I want to encourage you not to cut off your collective nose to spite your face. Religious organisations often remind us of our civic duty to one another, and they do much for the common good. Churches, for example, were the first providers of health-care and education in this country – long before the State took up those roles.

These days, religious organisations provide a wide range of public services which Councils are increasingly under-funded to do. Something like two-thirds of all foodbanks are provided by churches. It is not the Council chamber which rough sleepers use to keep warm in on cold winter days. It is the Nave of St Faith's church – open to all, in daylight hours – even during the three hours per week (on average) when a religious service is taking place.

Statutory funds should never be used for proselytization – of course. But St Faith's is not seeking your support to employ an evangelist, or to set up a prayer-group. All we seek is your help in making *the most iconic building in Havant* fully available to every citizen of Havant. Including any user of a wheelchair, or any attendee at future Civic Services, or theatrical and musical performances – be they Mayor or service-personnel – who seek the dignity of easy entry and a simple toilet.

Thank you for giving me the chance to make my case. I shall await your decision with interest and hope.