

Paper D1

Education & Learning and Finance Committees
Future of the Windermere Centre

United Reformed Church 2017
Church 2017
Church 2017



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Basic Information

Contact name and email address	The Revd Richard Church, Deputy General Secretary (Discipleship) richard.church@urc.org.uk
Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mission Council resolves to close the Windermere Centre with effect from 25 May 2017. 2. Mission Council sets a budget for the Windermere Centre's support from denominational funds for 2017 of []. 3. 3. [To be presented only if Resolution 1 were to be passed] Mission Council supports in principle the sale of the Windermere Centre premises in order to create a designated Lay Development Fund.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	To respond to the request of the last meeting of Mission Council to consider the implications of ceasing to use the Windermere Centre building and to bring detailed proposals.
Main points	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To update Mission Council on actions since the last meeting. 2. To review the purpose and actual usage of the Centre. 3. To record the principal results of the consultation. 4. To suggest ways forward for digital discipleship work. 5. To explain recent and prospective levels of financial support. 6. To outline some practicalities if the Centre were to close. 7. To explain the Education & Learning Committee's recommendation that the building should cease to be used as an RCL base. 8. To outline potential uses for the revenue stream that would be released by closure of the building. 9. To outline a possible Lay Development Fund that could be created if the building were sold.
Previous relevant documents	D1 & D2 at October 2016 Mission Council
Consultation has taken place with...	URC Trust, URC Finance Committee, Windermere Management Committee, North Western Synod, Centre staff

Summary of Impact

Financial	See paras 36-41
External (e.g. ecumenical)	None

The future of the Windermere Centre

At its last meeting, Mission Council resolved that:

Mission Council, mindful of the importance of:

- *The pastoral care of the Windermere Centre staff*
- *The requirement for proper consultation with the staff*
- *The necessity to take seriously any alternatives suggested in that consultation*
- *The value of the work of the Resource Centre for Learning (RCL) to the denomination*
- *The need to consult with the URC Trust, the Windermere Management Committee, the North Western Synod and Carver URC;*

Instructs the Finance and the Education and Learning Committees to look at the implications of ceasing to use the Windermere Centre building and to bring to Mission Council in May 2017 detailed proposals to enable a final decision to be made in the light of all the above consultations. Mission Council thanks (the ecumenical hospitality provider [name of provider deleted]) for its continuing support to the Windermere Centre but does not wish to pursue the option of a formal partnership. Mission Council agrees that the budget support arrangements for the Centre made in November 2015 should remain in place until at least its May 2017 meeting. Mission Council requests the Education and Learning Committee to bring forward creative proposals for the continuation and development of the Resource Centre for Learning. This should include exploring how the work on digital discipleship may be carried forward.

Background

1. In April 2016, the Windermere Management Committee (WMC) sought the permission of the Assembly Education & Learning Committee to explore separating the functions of the Centre by entering a trial period with an ecumenical hospitality provider on the one hand and establishing courses of general interest to members of the United Reformed Church and friends of the Windermere Centre on the other. The reason for doing this was a recognition that the Centre had lacked a sustainable approach to hospitality management in an increasingly demanding sector.
2. This was agreed and a potential partnership was developed with a Christian hospitality provider with a proven track record in running establishments in a professional way, catering largely but not exclusively for Christian groups. Mission Council October 2016 were offered a way forward involving partnering with this organisation in the running of the Centre with WMC taking responsibility for the RCL programmes of the Centre, but were not persuaded that the medium-term costs justified entering further partnership.
3. Instead Mission Council asked that the Education & Learning Committee, working with the Finance Committee, look at the full implications of ceasing to use the building. The third option of carrying on as in the past was discounted as having little support.

Update

4. Following the decision of the October Mission Council that a widespread consultation should be undertaken with all interested parties over the future of the Windermere Centre, several actions have been taken of which Mission Council should be aware.

5. The appointment of a part-time transitional director of the Windermere Centre has been made. The Revd Mitchell Bunting, previously Convener of the Windermere Management Committee, has agreed to serve from 1 December 2016 until the end of May 2017. The Synod of Scotland have graciously seconded him for this task from part of his role as Ecumenical Officer for the National Synod of Scotland.
6. Mindful of Mission Council's call to consult widely, much of Mr Bunting's time is being spent travelling to meet various groups who are involved in lay education and in the life of the Windermere Centre.
7. The vacancy created by Mr Bunting's appointment has been filled by the Revd John Smith who has agreed to serve as Convener of the Windermere Management Committee. Mr Smith is well suited to this role having previously served as Convener of the Assembly Education & Learning Committee.
8. The Secretary for Education & Learning clarified the timescale within which representations concerning the future of the Windermere Centre were invited and many comments have been received from individuals and groups and been posted on the URC website. <http://urc.org.uk/future-of-the-windermere-centre.html>
9. The Assembly Education & Learning Committee held a meeting in December, focused on the Windermere Centre in the light of the Mission Council deliberations and a summary of their recommendations appears later in this paper.

The Pastoral Care of Staff

10. The pastoral care of the staff who work at the Centre has been a priority and Mrs Jane Baird (Deputy General Secretary Administration & Resources) went immediately to meet with the staff following Mission Council to explain the decision of the last council meeting. Subsequent visits have been made to support and encourage staff in what is naturally an unsettling time for them all.

The value of the Windermere Centre as a Resource Centre for learning

Missional Considerations

11. The United Reformed Church has endorsed *Walking the Way – living the life of Jesus today* as its emphasis for the foreseeable future. It is therefore reasonable to consider the missional arguments for the continuation of the Windermere Centre in the light of this emphasis.
12. It has been suggested that the Windermere Centre has a distinctive contribution to the mission of the United Reformed Church as it sets out to “resource the church through hospitality and theological adventure”. This argument falls broadly into three categories: the content of its courses, the method by which it is financially sustained, and the nature of the hospitality offered by the Centre.
13. *iChurch*, digital discipleship and a missional critique of church have all been marks of the work of the Centre in recent years. ‘It’s your space’ and ‘Pay what you can’ have emphasised the service that the Centre exists to offer to the Church. Freely hosting groups of destitute asylum seekers, for example, have been actions which the Centre has taken to ‘flesh out’ the Church’s commitment to those on the margins of society.

14. The question that these beneficial missional initiatives pose is: are there other ways in which theological adventure and hospitality can be provided which achieve even greater benefits from the input of the Church's resources of people and finance? Among the responses noted by the Education & Learning Committee there were many who argued that the Windermere Centre was too far away and they were hoping that opportunities for discipleship development might be offered more locally. Others argued that 'It's your space' deterred them from coming and 'Pay what you Can' was confusing as it was unclear when it should apply and when it should not.
15. Clearly if the Assembly Education & Learning Committee were not devoting at least £150,000 per year of their budget towards the support of the Windermere Centre, it would be possible to devote more money towards the employment of lay training devoted to Walking the Way and deployed more regionally. In addition, the proceeds of sale of the Windermere Centre could establish a fund devoted to ensuring that Walking the Way could be resourced through a dedicated lay training fund.
16. Some statistics on the type of use of the Centre in recent years are significant.

Some of these are reproduced below:

(Numbers of attendees)

Year	Lay training for church purposes	Not lay training for church purposes	Church events
2013	402	294	235
2014	271	479	268
2015	249	525	332
2016	87	481	241
TOTALS	1009	1779	1076

NB Column 1 relates to equipping discipleship; Col. 2 hobby events; Col. 3 church weekends

17. Another factor was the need to reduce costs to meet tight budgets. This had a similar effect on the Centre as the 2012 budget cuts had. But the Centre was not established primarily to be a venue for committee meetings.
18. The lower number of lay training events in 2016 is due in part to the Director's resignation and the effect of the marketing manager having to divert her attention to being acting Director. However, it indicates that there was a lower take-up for lay training events over the past three years. It more significantly reflects the change to 'It's your space' reflecting a move away from programme provision to an approach tailored to the needs of groups.
19. Some correspondents have urged the Church to refocus the life of the Windermere Centre around some aspect of the Church's life such as retreats and spirituality or as a pastoral training centre. Other contributors have urged a fund-raising campaign together with energetic advocacy of the courses that the Centre offers by a Director touring the country to speak to churches and synods to envision people to pursue lay training.

20. The contributions highlight the value that the Windermere Centre has had to many people in their path of discipleship. They also highlight the general lack of knowledge about the extensive and distinctive approaches which the WMC has undertaken in recent years to try and move beyond a shrinking customer base within the URC; over a third of a million pounds has been provided from denominational funds, over and above the regular Windermere budget, to support these initiatives. Many of the consultation suggestions have been tried in the past and found to make limited impact on Centre usage.

Wider Consultations

The following groups have been consulted regarding the future of the Windermere Centre:

The URC Trust

21. Whilst not being a policy making body, the Trust has advised the following:
- Regular expenditure: If the building cannot be used for URC charitable purposes, the URC should not spend revenue year-on-year in using it in other ways
 - Stewardship: If the building ceased to be used for URC charitable purposes, the Trust would expect to view it as an asset that had to be responsibly stewarded, and that might lead to a decision to sell
 - Alternative uses: Some alternative uses that were suggested might be fine if someone else took the building on to fulfil them, but they would not necessarily be appropriate ventures for the URC to manage.

The Windermere Management Committee

22. A detailed paper was received from the WMC which was summarised in the following statement. 'Following their consideration of the case for continuing and the effect of a further drawn out deliberation on the staff, at this stage the Committee supports the view that the Centre should close, and advises that this should take place as quickly as possible after the decision, and that any decision to carry on would have seriously difficult implications in terms of the reduced Business Case.'

North Western and Mersey Synods

23. The officers of the North-Western Synod have expressed concern about the short time within which the consultation regarding the possible closure of the Windermere centre is taking place. Their contention is that the Church needs a longer period in which to reflect on the Centre and its role and to that end have offered a sum of £250,000 over the next three years.
24. The intention of the offer is to defray the costs to the Assembly funds of maintaining the Centre and to give more time for thought about how the Centre might function as a lay training centre for the north of England.
25. Whilst the generosity of this offer is appreciated, it is not clear how the additional time will help to minimise the uncertainty of the current staff or to establish any new thinking, given that the Windermere Centre's income has in each of the past seven years been below budget and throughout that time various initiatives have been taken by the Windermere Management Committee to try to remedy the situation. The figures presented to the October Mission Council showed that the £250,000 offered would not cover the costs of a further three years of the Centre so M&M funding would still be required.

26. Mersey Synod also seek a pause to enable detailed discussion of the need for lay training in the belief that there is an apparent need for a viable costed national strategy for lay training including residential, teaching and IT components. This work remains the responsibility of the Education & Learning Committee whether or not the Centre remains open.

Carver Uniting Church (formerly Carver Memorial URC)

27. Carver have indicated their sadness at the possible closure of the Centre with which they have had such a close working relationship over many years. However, if the decision is to cease to use Windermere as an RCL they hope that a way might be found both for a good price for the URC Trust and community value to apply equally in any sale of the property.
28. With that in mind they have said that should additional local help be of use in assisting with examining any possible avenues they would do their best to support it.
29. They further comment that if the national Church would like to examine further work for the RCL or *iChurch* using Carver premises they would be very pleased to work to make this possible.

Digital Discipleship

30. In the development of a successor course to Training for Learning and Service (TLS), as well as in broader thinking about how local churches can be resourced locally as they work to deepen discipleship within their congregants, online resourcing will play an ever more significant role. Whilst questions of access and availability must be addressed, the adoption of digital communication is as big a shift in the 21st century as the printing press was at the time of the European Reformation.
31. The ease with which churches downloaded vision4life materials, the development of the Windermere Online festival, the growing circulation of the daily devotions since Advent 2016 and the popularity of *iChurch* throughout the United Reformed Church all illustrate the importance of digital discipleship.
32. The Blended Learning Task Group's report for the Education & Learning Committee *Blended Lives, Blended Learning. Formation for Christian Discipleship in the Digital Age* <http://bltgreporturc.org.uk/> makes several recommendations for the whole URC, including that the Church make a significant investment in building its capacity for online learning through identifying and networking digital champions, in collaboration with synods and the assembly communications committee.
33. To achieve this, they recommend that the Education & Learning Committee, in consultation with other Assembly Committees, explore the possibility of creating a post of Online Learning Enabler, as the potential in this area could not be realised without the appointment of a dedicated staff member with the necessary professional skills.
34. The draft job summary of the suggested post assumes the continuing attention of Assembly Committees, Synods and RCLs to a range of expressions of digital discipleship. This includes *iChurch* which was pioneered by the Windermere Centre as part of its role as a Resource Centre for Learning.

35. To assess the viability and sustainability of *iChurch*, when separated from the Windermere Centre, steps have been taken to establish a part-time, six-month temporary post of *iChurch* Project Officer. This is intended to support existing and potential *iChurch* users while the Education & Learning and Communications Committees decide how best to take the work forward. A joint Communications/ Education & Learning *iChurch* Strategy Group has started work with clear terms of reference and will report to the two committees.

Financial Support

36. Requests have been received for Mission Council to be told how the financial support given to the Windermere Centre compares with that given to the other three Resource Centres for Learning (RCLs). The bald data is provided in the table below, which shows the total direct transfer of funds from the Church's central budget for the work of each RCL last year and, for comparison, five years previously. For the three RCLs that train ministerial students (EM1) a substantial share of this money does not go to the RCL itself but is in fact payments to cover the academic fees and maintenance costs support of these students: this element is identified in italics in the table.

Table: Financial Support for RCLs (£k)

	2011 Core Budget	2011 Core Actual	<i>2011 EM1 Actual</i>	2016 Core Budget	2016 Core Actual	<i>2016 EM1 Actual</i>
Northern College	218	214	<i>184</i>	240	248	<i>272</i>
Scottish College	35	37	<i>61</i>	36	36	<i>19</i>
Westminster College	286	283	<i>306</i>	295	320	<i>294</i>
Windermere Centre	110	136	<i>0</i>	134	179	<i>0</i>
Total	649	670	<i>551</i>	705	783	<i>585</i>

37. Before attempting to draw any conclusions from this data, it is necessary to notice what very different institutions the four RCLs are and the major differences in the services they are asked to provide to the Church. The budget process used by the Education and Learning Committee is specifically designed to ensure that the financial support does recognise in as fair a way as possible these differences.

Some of the differences are summarized below:

- Three RCLs operate from dedicated buildings; the Scottish College model of learning does not require one.
- The costs of running the buildings used by Westminster and Windermere fall wholly on the URC; at Northern these costs are shared ecumenically.
- Three RCLs provide initial ministerial training (EM1) and a large share of their funding is directly correlated with the number of such students in training in the given year; the Windermere Centre is not involved in EM1.
- Residential EM1 training is by far the most expensive form of training per capita that the URC asks for from its RCLs; only Northern and Westminster provide this.
- Westminster and Windermere have received substantial donations from Assembly towards building projects during the last decade; the other RCLs have not.

Clearly it is not possible to draw any simple comparative value-for-money conclusion from the table above.

38. What the table does illustrate is that of the four RCLs, three succeed in working within their agreed budgets or only a few percentage points above them. By contrast, the Windermere Centre has regularly required significant extra support beyond that agreed. In each of the last seven years Windermere has exceeded its budgeted support and by an average of 27%; this is mainly due to usage consistently falling below the levels hoped for at the time the annual budget was agreed.

Funding Scenarios

39. The Finance Committee has looked at the potential costs of running the Centre for 2017 as well as estimating the potential costs of closure. It concluded that, were the Centre to remain open throughout this year, it would be expected to generate a deficit of around £185,000. This, in part, reflects uncertainty caused by the MC decision in October 2016 but also reflects the more general recent fall-off in business.
40. 40.1 If the Centre closes in May 2017 the Committee calculates the 2017 position will produce a running cost deficit of around £100,000 up to the point of closure.
- 40.2 If the Centre were to close, there would also be some one-off closure costs incurred subsequently. These include redundancy payments and other costs of dealing with leased equipment and holding the unused building for the remainder of the year. These closure costs amount to around a further £100,000 but could properly be offset against any sale proceeds were the property then to be sold and so not be a burden on the M&M Fund.
41. Mission Council will need to set a budget for 2017 for the Centre to replace the notional, temporary number used in the initial 2017 budget pending a decision about the Centre's future. The Finance Committee will present a suitable resolution to Mission Council once the Council's mind on the future of the Centre is clear.

Proposed future usages if not used as an RCL

42. There have been many suggestions mooted. These include that the building be used as wedding reception venue, that it be operated by the staff as a small guest house, occasionally hosting such church groups as might wish to use it. The staff have indicated that they believe that with some additional time the Centre can be made financially viable, although independent advice presented to the last Mission Council clearly suggested otherwise.
43. The transitional director has spoken of the value that such a house might have to the dispersed members of the Iona Community if it were still available for bookings, another submission argued for its retention as a retreat centre. Carver Church suggested that the centre should be used for supported housing or housing for older people which they indicate is in short supply in the area. None of these alternative uses have yet been accompanied by a business plan. Some of them would require the building to be sold to another body capable of adopting new uses not within the URC's objectives, which would also take the financial risk of pursuing such ventures away from the URC Trust.

Contingency Plans

In the event of the Windermere Centre continuing as a Resource Centre for Learning.

44. As the secondment of the transitional director and the operations manager end in May, people would need to be found to occupy these roles and to develop a fresh vision for the Windermere Centre.
45. As noted above, a fresh budget of around £185,000 for 2017 would have to be funded by the Church and discussions begin about where reductions in the budget of the Education & Learning Committee, or some other committee, should be imposed in subsequent years to continue to provide this sort of level of financial support to the Centre.

In the event of the closure of the Windermere Centre

46. If a decision is made by Mission Council to cease using the Windermere building for an RCL, then the date recommended for closure is 25 May. This will give the benefit to the outgoing staff of allowing them to seek alternative employment while the tourist season is still young. The staff have made it clear that if closure is decided upon, an early date would be their preference.
47. Closure of the Centre would end Education & Learning's responsibility for the Windermere Centre. Education & Learning and the Windermere Management Committee would hand over responsibility to the URC Trustees. As soon as a possible a closure team would be identified (the Christian hospitality provider previously offered help in this matter).
48. In the short term the URC Trust would take responsibility for security arrangements for the empty premises. For the longer term they would be guided by any steers from Mission Council about the use or disposal of the premises, subject to their legal obligations as Trustees.

Committee responses as requested by Mission Council

49. Having been asked to look at the implications of ceasing to use the Windermere Centre building, the Education & Learning Committee at its meeting on 19 December 2016 first considered the submissions received by then. It was important to test the mind of the committee members, and therefore go over some of the same ground covered by Mission Council in October 2016 in the light of the ideas and comments received. After much discussion the committee concluded that its recommendation to the Mission Council meeting in May 2017 would be:
 - i) to cease using the Windermere Centre building as a residential RCL in its current configuration;
 - ii) to release the relevant portion of the E&L budget designated for Windermere to take forward the work of lay discipleship;
 - iii) to explore urgently with the URC Trust potential other uses of the building.

What follows are indications of what needs to be done in each of these areas

Ceasing to use the building

- 49.1 The Windermere Management Committee, having spoken with staff over the intervening period, and in the light of hospitality industry experience have recommended that if a decision is made to close the centre it should be implemented as soon as possible, with a closure date of 25 May 2017. This would benefit the staff to find alternative employment early in the season.
- 49.2 The Windermere Management Committee would be drawn to an end, with the Education & Learning Committee handing over responsibility for the building to the URC Trustees. A meeting of WMC is scheduled for June 19-20. This could be a joint meeting of the outgoing WMC and the people appointed by the Trustees to look after the building until decisions are made about its disposal.
- 49.3 Deposits for bookings already made for after 25 May would be returned, and suggestions made for alternative venues in the area. A list of potential venues would be drawn up in advance of 25 May.
- 49.4 The WMC has produced an outline of practical arrangements in the event of closure which they would discuss with the URC Trust.
- 49.5 The Human Resources Office at Church House would continue to oversee arrangements for legal compliance and pastoral care of staff throughout the closure process.

Using the E&L budget

- 50.1 Mission Council asked the Education & Learning Committee to bring forward creative proposals for the continuation and development of the Resource Centre for Learning, to include exploring how the work on digital discipleship may be carried forward.
- 50.2 In 2015 Mission Council agreed that the normal level of budget support for the Centre's work should be less than £125kpa. Therefore, assuming a budget of £120k for the sake of argument in the coming years, what follows is an example of how such a sum could be used to take forward the work of lay discipleship.
- 50.3 The educational principles underlying the Education & Learning Committee's approach seen, for example, in the terms of reference for the group which is designing the successor to TLS are in tune with the 2006 Training Review. They speak of lay development which is integrated, peer-group focused, offered through dispersed delivery that is accessible locally, contextual, residential where necessary, offering blended learning, and offering excellence.
- 50.4 The Windermere Centre would no longer be available as a residential centre, but residential learning would take place as close to where people live as possible, and the cost of this would be included in the budget for specific programmes as it has always been. Facilities for residential courses at Northern and Westminster Colleges would continue to be available.
- 50.5 The £120k previously used to pay for the salary and on-costs of the Director of the Windermere Centre, some administrative support, and the underwriting of programme costs could instead be used for the salaries of two staff dedicated to supporting congregations to be confident in engaging with 21st century forms of communication i.e. a possible iChurch staff post and the projected post of online learning enabler described above in sections 33-34.

- 50.6 The place where these two posts would report is yet to be determined. The nature of the work suggests that they could be located anywhere in the three nations, as they could work from home and travel extensively. There is a fruitful discussion to be had as to whether they should be based in one or more of the other three RCLs, within the Education & Learning team as part of the staff of the successor to TLS, or even within groups of Synods.

Other uses of the building

51. Exploring urgently with the URC Trust potential other uses of the building.
- 51.1 Potential other uses of the building have been suggested above. The Education & Learning Committee would argue that the greatest need from its perspective is for a lay development fund which would be able to offer funding analogous to the EM3 allowance which Ministers of Word and Sacraments and CRCWs can draw upon for individual continuing development. This would be made possible by the profit from the sale of the building being invested to create an annual income. Current estimates suggest that this could be in the region of £40kpa.
- 51.2 In 2015 the Education & Learning Finance Sub-Committee looked at a draft plan for using a small inherited fund assigned to it as a Lay Development Fund, but concluded that the total non-recurring income of £15k would be better used by being set aside for the development work involved in designing the successor to TLS. The draft plan could be the basis for using the recurring annual income from the “Windermere Fund”.
- 51.3 A budget of £40,000 per year could make 115 grants i.e. 8 grants per Synod of £350 per individual, although not everyone would necessarily request the maximum £350. If the normal amount were £200 that would be 200 grants or 15 per Synod. The funding criteria set by the Education & Learning Committee would emphasise bold and adventuresome discipleship development for the sake of the kingdom. Synods would decide who gets the grants, and it would be in addition to any existing provision from the Synod.
52. The Committee will invite Mission Council to express a view on this option should a decision be made to close the Centre.

Conclusion

53. The Windermere Centre has been iconic for many people within the United Reformed Church, and is a place where lives have been changed over the past 30 years. The hospitality and theological adventure represented in the place and the people of the Centre are immeasurable. The proposals put forward in this paper offer ways of releasing the investment represented by the Windermere Centre to transform lives throughout the United Reformed Church. They take into consideration the changes within the URC over the past 30 years. The Centre was pioneering in taking the development of lay people seriously. Its legacy must be to continue to give people access to hospitality and theological adventure wherever they find themselves. Thirty years on, there are Training Officers, Mission Enablers, and Children and Youth Development Officers, pioneering ministries and new ways of being church. The Education and Learning Committee believes we should now be ready to release resources of personnel and finance to meet the perennial challenge of lay discipleship in fresh ways that are collaborative, risky, and venturesome.