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There may come a time when a church is no longer needed for regular public worship.

We can help find a suitable new use for it or, if it is important to the nation's heritage, preserve it as it stands.

Exterior view of St Andrews church Handsworth

Closing a church

There is a formal process for closing a church. This is governed by Church law and managed by the diocese with the help of the Church Commissioners.

Not all cases necessarily end in closure. The process can sometimes lead to new ideas and opportunities for sustainable use of the building. Or it may lead to a solution which involves sharing the building for worship and other uses.

If a decision is made to close, then the Church Commissioners and the diocese will seek a new use for the church building and a suitable buyer to take it on.

The Church Buildings Council has an important role to advise on the heritage implications of this. We have a dedicated committee to identify what is special about a church that ought to be preserved after worship has ended and the building has passed out of the care of the congregation.

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Giving the building to a trust or community group

Some church buildings are of such great architectural quality and historic interest that they deserve to be preserved as they are, with their furnishings intact and the churchyard unchanged.

In these cases, the best option may be to give the church to someone who can maintain it and open it to the public. For example:

- Local individuals or community groups

- Churches Conservation Trust
- Friends of Friendless Churches
- Norwich Historic Churches Trust

Under this kind of ownership, the church usually remains available for occasional worship and light-touch uses such as concerts and exhibitions.

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Accommodating new uses

In most cases, the church can accommodate a new use without harming its significance. But it may need to undergo some changes.

We advise the [Church Commissioners](#) on how a new user might do a conversion or adaptation project that respects the qualities of the building.

The key factors are:

The form and massing of the building and its presence in the street, area or landscape

This is about the exterior of the church - its shape, profile and bulk – and its value as a feature in the streetscape or landscape, when seen close to and from further away.

It affects how far a new owner can change it or extend it.

It also affects whether they could build separate buildings nearby and, if so, what size and form they should take.

The church will normally need to remain the main building on the site and new work should not obscure or overwhelm it.

The materials and architectural style

This affects how a new owner might alter, extend and design new buildings and what materials would best be used.

The rooms, spaces and inside layout

The volumes and planning of the interior and the value of the views along and across it affect how far a new owner can subdivide the interior into smaller spaces by building partitions and intermediate floors.

In most cases, it's important to keep some floor-to-roof or end-to-end views of the main worship space.

The sensitivity of the built fabric

This is about the archaeological and architectural importance of the walls, floors, roofs and ceilings.

This affects:

- The scope for levelling floors
- The routing of building services (e.g. plumbing and wiring)
- The scope for altering or removing architectural features

We will think about how a new use will change the normal temperature and humidity inside the building, and what effects there might be on sensitive features such as wall paintings and stained glass.

Where a church has little or no heritage interest, we advise whether demolition is acceptable, in heritage terms. This might be at the beginning of the process, if the situation is clear-cut, or it may follow a search for a new use in which no suitable proposal comes forward.

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The church furnishings

It will not always be possible or appropriate to keep the church's furnishings in the building once it has been put to a new use.

We advise the Church Commissioners and the diocese on the historic, architectural and artistic interest of the furnishings.

They will also take other factors into account including their importance to the parish and wider community and the sacramental significance of certain items.

The other key factor is the nature of the new use: if it is public or charitable, there may be more scope for certain items to remain.

Font, altar, communion table and plate

These items have a sacramental purpose and are normally transferred to another church within the benefice or somewhere else in the diocese.

Fixed items (e.g. ledger slabs, monuments, pulpit, pews etc.)

Fixed items which are part of the building's architecture often remain in place.

If they are very significant, the Commissioners can make an agreement with the new owner to provide for public access to view them by appointment.

Most new uses will not work with large sets of fixed pews in place but it is often possible for a few to stay in the church.

War memorials

War memorials have a wider community significance.

We normally advise that they be transferred to a nearby church or community building unless the new use for the closed church is a public one.

This is in line with government guidance.

[Find out more about war memorials](#)

[Stained glass](#)

We normally advise that stained [glass windows](#) remain in place.

But if they are very significant and the new use is not a public one, then we normally recommend that they should be relocated.

Otherwise, in broad terms, the guidelines in place for disposal of items in open churches apply to those in closed churches.

[Find out more about disposing of church items](#)

[Organs](#)

Sometimes, the new owner is willing to keep the organ in the church and maintain it in playable condition.

Otherwise, we advise that a suitable home is found for it before the church changes hands. There are specialist groups which can help with this.

[Bells](#)

We normally advise that bells should stay in place if the new use is a public one. If not, and the bells are very significant, we normally recommend that they are relocated. There are specialist groups which can help with this.

Historic bellframes should normally stay in situ.

[Clocks](#)

Clocks with a clockface on the outside of the building have a public function. We normally advise that they stay in place with an agreement to make sure they are maintained. The local authority can sometimes help with this.

Otherwise, in broad terms, the guidelines in place for disposal of items in open churches apply to those in closed churches.

[Find out more about disposing of church items](#)

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New uses for the churchyard

We help the [Church Commissioners](#) understand the implications of new uses for the churchyard.

We advise them on:

Its character, amenity value and role as a suitable setting for the church

This suggests how much and what kind of change the churchyard can sustain while keeping its essential qualities.

It affects:

- The placement and design of any new building and hard landscaping (e.g. access path, parking area, etc.)
- The scope for creating private or semi-private areas with hedges or fencing

The protection of burials and archaeological remains

Their protection does not prevent development.

But it might affect:

- Where any new building is constructed
- The type of foundations used
- The routing of building services (e.g. water, power, etc.)

Any development will need to include measures to record what is found and rebury any human remains disturbed by the work in line with the strict guidelines in place.

Find out more about [human remains](#)

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Monuments and gravestones

[Monuments and gravestones](#) will generally remain in place with a guarantee of public access for people to tend graves and pay their respects.

This is particularly important for [war memorials](#). But we may advise that they be relocated.

The natural environment

Development in the churchyard will need to protect its trees, especially ancient or veteran trees and those with tree [preservation orders](#).

New users will also need to think about conserving the habitat of [protected species](#).

[Other outdoor space](#)

Some churches do not have a churchyard, burial ground, or any green space at all nearby.

This is often the case with urban churches but they may still have outdoor space which has amenity value. The character of this outside space will be different to the churchyard of most village churches. But many of the factors affecting development set out above will still apply.

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What do we base our advice on?

We base our advice on the church [buildings report](#) – a document we prepare early in the process.

It includes:

- A detailed survey and description of the building
- Details of existing protections (e.g. listed building, scheduled monuments, etc.)
- An assessment of the significance of the church, its furnishings and the churchyard

Our advice on the scope for change draws on a wealth of imaginative and sensitive ideas of conversion projects which have been carried out in recent years.

Find out more in this excellent guide to [new uses in former churches](#)

We normally advise that significant churches are professionally recorded before disposal or conversion. Recording normally takes the form of a photographic survey in line with [Historic England guidance](#).

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Also of interest

Diocesan strategic reviews

[Integrate church buildings into mission and ministry planning](#)

Ideas for new uses

[Inspiration from Historic England](#)

Statutory Advisory Committee for Closed and Closing Churches

Find out more about us

Closed church buildings available for new uses

A list of closed churches currently available for disposal

Church Building Reports

How we go about assessing the building

The closure process

Find out more about the formal process

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/church-buildings-council/how-we-manage-our-buildings/churches-no-longer-needed>