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Historic seating can be significant in its own right as well as a major element of the significance of the church as a whole. Changing or replacing it can have a big impact on the interior of your church.

We can help you understand your seating and the options for making changes.

Download our guidance



Adam Shaw

The value of historic seating

Seating is an important part of the furnishing of a church and makes a key contribution to the character of the interior. It usually includes:

- Individual chairs or stalls for the clergy in the chancel
- Choirstalls in the chancel
- And seating for the congregation in the nave and aisles (e.g. chairs, open benches and pews, some with doors and panelling and known as box pews.)

The interest of the seat furniture will be made up of its:

- Age
- Rarity
- Quality
- Workmanship
- And its importance as part of the building

Where the seating is of great historic or artistic interest the case for retention may be overwhelming. Medieval seating is particularly rare and highly prized. There is a presumption against removing or altering any pre-Victorian and especially pre-Reformation seating. Many churches have nineteenth-century pews or benches that are not of great artistic merit in themselves yet contribute greatly to the overall character of the church. This is especially true if they were installed as part of a wider restoration and reordering. Some may have been designed by the architect who restored the building. If so, the case for keeping the seat furniture would be much stronger.

Remember: Historic seating can be significant in its own right as well as a major element of the significance of the church as a whole.

Do you need permission?

Yes. Any change to your church's seating requires a faculty.

Assessing the case for new seating

The decision to remove historic seating should be made on a case-by-case basis following a careful assessment of significance, needs and impacts.

There is a presumption against any change that will harm the historic character of the church. This means that, if you wish to replace all or some of your church's seating, you will need to demonstrate that the need for change is strong enough to justify the harm.

We recommend a step-by-step approach:

Step one: Evaluate the current situation

Start with research to find out what is known about the seating already. Make an analysis of the fabric itself and how it contributes to your church more widely.

This will form the basis of your statement of significance

For some cases, you may need a report from a specialist furniture historian. Contact your DAC for advice

Step two: Assess and define your needs

Ask yourself:

- What is it that you want to achieve?
- Can the existing furniture provide this? Can it be adapted?
- Does it need repair?
- How will the furniture work liturgically and practically (e.g. for normal services, major services, events, day-to-day use)

Take account of related factors such as:

- Storage
- Maintenance
- And the effects on the floors, heating and circulation round the building

This will all feed into your statement of needs

- Set out the demand for change
- And show how the impact on the character and significance is balanced by the benefits to worship and mission

Step three: Consider the available options and decide what to do

Think about different ways to achieve your objectives.

- Is it possible to keep some of the existing seating, especially the more significant items?
- Is it possible to make improvements to your historic seating for comfort and flexibility?

There may be a case for consultation in the congregation and wider community.

Step four: Assess the impact of your proposal

You will need to complete your statement of significance with an assessment of the impact of your preferred option on the character and interest of the church.

How can the impacts be reduced or avoided?

There may be a need to ask for professional advice. [Contact your diocese](#)

Step five: Consult experts

Discuss your ideas with your [inspecting architect](#) early on and seek advice from your [Diocesan Advisory Committee](#)

This is also the time to consult:

- The relevant [amenity societies](#)
- The [Church Buildings Council](#) (if necessary)

Step six (if you are making the case for replacing all or some of the seating): Choose new seating

We recommend that you choose high quality wooden chairs or benches **without** upholstery.

Our experience is that well-designed wooden chairs have the greatest sympathy with historic churches and offer the best value for money given their long lifespans.

You should do some research on what furniture is available and what would suit your needs. It is worth speaking direct to manufacturers and going to see some examples already installed in churches.

Download [our guidance](#) for:

- A checklist of questions on choosing new seating
- reasons why upholstered furniture should be avoided
- details of specialist makers of wooden seating and a selection of products which have been successfully installed in churches

Step seven: Consult and gain approval

Speak to your [DAC Secretary](#) about when to do this and what documents to include.

Also of interest

Grants for historic interiors

[Get help restoring historic seating](#)

Making changes to your building

[Let us take you through the steps of a re-ordering project](#)